

2012

Spectrum, 2013

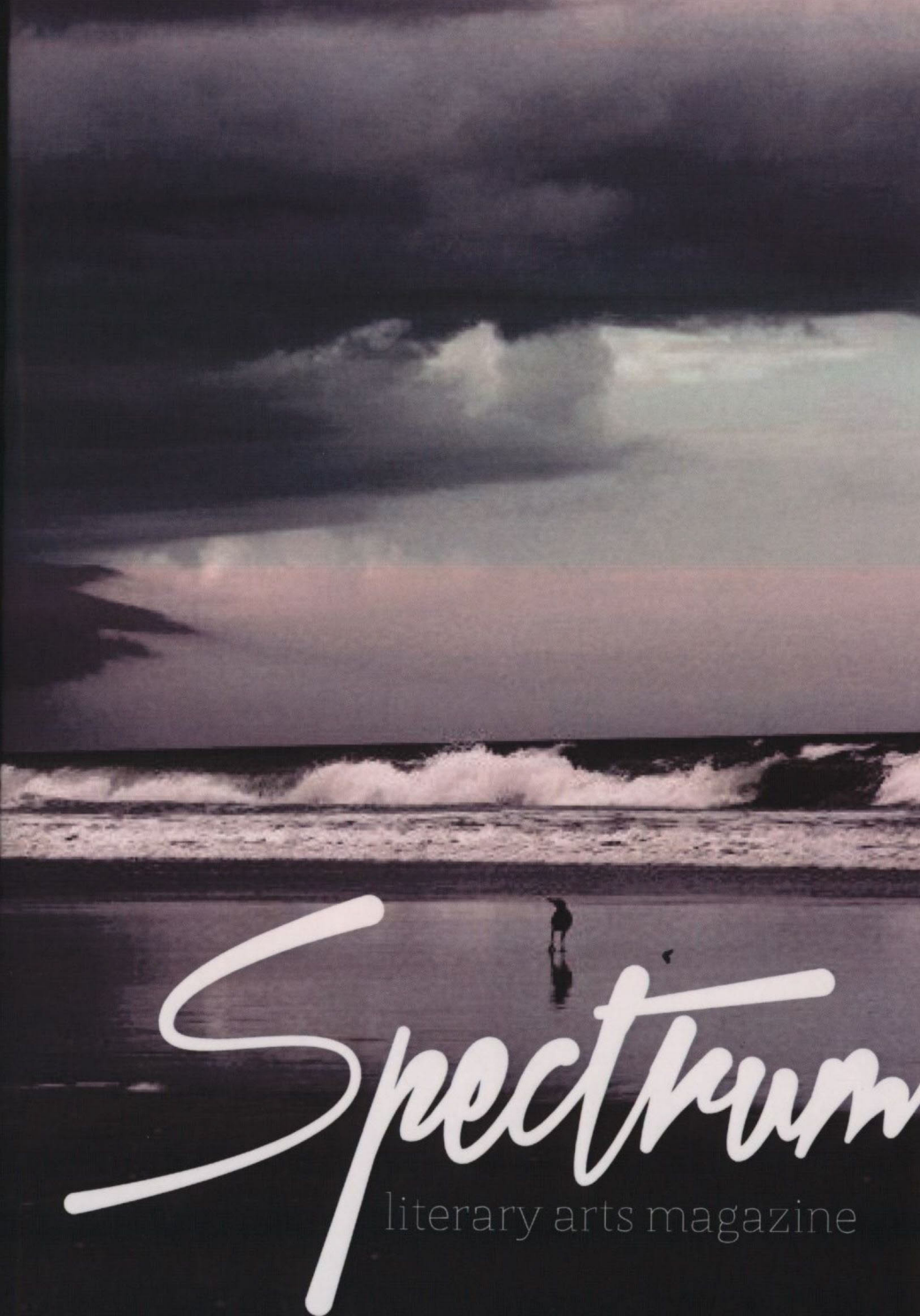
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Spectrum

literary arts magazine

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2013 *Editorial Staff*

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and a special thanks to
Professor Daniel Bowman Jr.
for serving as our off-campus judge.

Notes & THANKS

Editors' Notes

As both a reader and a contributor to *Spectrum* since my freshman year, I have been astounded by the creativity that Northwestern students possess. This year, my senior year, I have had the pleasure of being *Spectrum's* editor, and once again, I have been amazed at the sheer brilliance of which students are capable. Some people express themselves through art, and some through words. *Spectrum* 2013 allows for expression in both of these areas, resulting in a literary arts journal that allows me to see what the authors and the artists see: to feel what they feel. The emotions poured into the words and the artwork in this year's journal resonate with everything within me.

So I invite you, Reader, to journey with me through life's ups and downs, joys and sorrows, tempests and times of calm on a gutsy journey into the writable. "*And by the way, everything in life is writable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt*" (Sylvia Plath).

- Holly Stewart, Editor-in-Chief

College campuses are some of the best places for people to share their work. Athletes have games and competitions. Theatre artists have theatrical productions. Musicians have concerts. Visual artists have gallery shows. But what about writers? On this campus, one major writing outlet is what you are holding in your hands: *Spectrum*. This journal provides a chance for young writers to achieve what nearly every writer dreams of: seeing our words in print. Publication. The chance to tell our stories.

Beauty. Humor (albeit some of it quite dark). Pride. Creativity. Vulnerability. Strength. Honesty. Light. That is what you will find inked on these pages. Our stories.

- Hannah Barker, Assistant Editor

Judge's Note

Writer Sarah Wells recently spoke to my class about editing *River Teeth*, a journal of nonfiction housed at Ashland University. When a student asked about selecting work from submissions, she explained, "It's easy to see what is good and what is bad. It's much, much harder to look at a lot of good work and determine what is great. You make the best choices you can and live with them."

That sums up my experience reading the 2013 *Spectrum*, trying to choose "winners" among many worthy entries. To all the writers: diligence and a good work ethic are far more important than talent and accolades. Keep writing. And thank you for letting me into your worlds.

- Daniel Bowman Jr., 2013 Off-Campus Judge
Asst. Professor of English, Taylor University

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short
FICTION

| Judge's Note |

Ron Hansen has written that, "...a faith-inspired fiction squarely faces the imponderables of life... Such fiction is instinctive rather than conformist; it features vital characters rather than comforting types." It is this kind of vitality I discovered in Ashlee Koedam's Derek, who, in his deep grief, takes solace in an old motorcycle, the ballgame on the radio, and the garage, where "the dusty cement floor" has "one long, shallow crack running vertically just to the left of center." What a great image of Derek's—and our—brokenness, just one motorcycle ride away from redemption.

Despite other-worldly scenarios, I see, too, a facing of life's imponderables in Alison Mulder's "Empty Sky," where the young narrator, "like most of the other gawkers," makes "the trip to the country to get one last look at the stars," and, perhaps, at what it means to be human. In Joshua Klope's "Fearing the Wolf," Damien encounters a stranger who, in a poignant moment, explains, "I think a lot of people are just afraid, so they stay away." Indeed!

These stories of vulnerability can make us less afraid and open us up to healing.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT NOW?

by Ashlee Koedam

Derek works in the garage more now since Jennie died from ovarian cancer. He and their daughters, Kandace and Amber, were left to fill the enormous hole of timeliness and orderliness and organization that Jennie left. They do their best. But it feels clumsy.

The dusty cement floor, with one long, shallow crack running vertically just to the left of the center. The red, metallic tool cabinets Derek had mounted on the east wall when they moved into the house. His 12" T.V. opposite the garage door, which was always open when it wasn't raining or snowing, and sometimes even then left ajar. Two or three motorcycles, only one of which is his, to the right, in need of repair (the Williams' garage was never used for parking their family cars). These things are familiar to him. He can pretend nothing has changed. Working on his motorcycles while watching the Red Sox on T.V. keeps his mind from wandering, wondering what might come next. For him. For his daughters.

He doesn't have to worry about where the girls were tonight, though. Amber, his thirteen year-old, is reading inside. And Kandace: he can hear her voice just out of the garage and around the corner. A bench sits there below the window, and Derek hears the hushed but forceful tones of argument float like smoke from the bench into the garage. Kandace and Darin are sitting there.

Derek turns the volume up on the T.V. Johnny Damon steals home. The crowd goes crazy while Derek wishes he was a snoopy enough father to try to listen in on his daughter's conversation.

Kandace is a senior this year. She met Darin in cross-country

that fall. That was how most kids met, if they didn't go to the same school: through sports or speech or some other extra-curricular activity.

That was how he had met Jennie. Of course, motorcycle racing wasn't connected with the school, but it was an extra-curricular activity for Derek. His favorite spot back then was a dirt track almost exactly halfway between Red Acre and Plymouth. One mile from the river. Jennie liked to go watch her brother race. And when her brother graduated, she liked to go watch Derek race.

Alex Rodriguez makes a third out, ending the fourth inning. Darin, outside, raises his voice too loudly, as far as Derek is concerned: "If you don't want to get out of here—"

Derek glances out the window. He can see Darin's head looking down on the bench where Kandace is still sitting.

"—how will you ever get over what you're feeling now?"

"Shhh," Kandace hisses.

The whisperings continue.

Derek had tried to convince Kandace of the same thing. She was a brilliant student and an exceptional runner. She could have her pick of colleges, but instead she decided to take a year off and work as a cashier for her father's motorcycle repair business.

"I just need some more time," she had told him. "Besides, Amber is going to be a freshman next year. It will be good for her to have me here when she's starting high school."

"You don't need to do this for me," Derek had told her.

"I'm not doing it for you," she'd said.

Derek knew Darin was going to run at the Division II school, Minnesota State University in Mankato. Darin wanted Kandace to go too.

Derek doesn't hear what is said next, but Darin comes into his view through the open garage door. He walks towards his car parked in

the driveway and slams the door. The black Monte Carlo's lights flip on, shining into the garage, half blinding Derek as he watches the car back out of the driveway and head back towards Plymouth.

Kandace is still sitting on the bench around the corner. Derek works on his 1977 Yamaha in silence. The yellow bike sits upside down, its wheels motionless. Circles of potential energy. Waiting to explode. To turn and turn and turn on a dirt road, a black top, going anywhere, nowhere. To just leave. If only he could get the damn engine to work.

He turns to his row of tool cabinets that line the east side of the garage. He finds a Phillips screwdriver in the second cupboard, and turns around with it in hand to see Kandace standing opposite him.

In a baggy sweatshirt and blue jeans, her arms crossed in front of her, she stands with horrible posture like she always does—one hip sunk below the other—her long blonde hair pulled back in a messy bun, not unlike the way it looked during a cross country meet.

She says, "Do you want to go for a ride?"

The thing about ex-motorcycle-racers is that they can't bear having less than two bikes of their own. The broken Yamaha is thankfully not an obstacle for a drive.

"Sure," Derek says as he turns around to return the screwdriver to its home in the cabinet. "We'll have to take the Suzuki."

"Ok," she says. But she doesn't move.

"You should go tell your sister we are going for a ride. She'll be all right by herself for a while."

She turns and, in one long half-jump clears the two steps that lead to the door of the house. Derek walks out of the garage where his black Suzuki is sitting. He kicks up the kickstand, backs it away from the house, and turns it around to face the driveway. He straddles the bike. The shadowed streets are slightly illuminated by the light posts and by the half-moon. The stars are out.

He hears the house door open and close. Kandace comes to stand next to him with two helmets in her arms. She hands one to Derek and starts putting hers on.

"She was already in bed," Kandace says as Derek puts on the helmet. "But I told her we were going."

"Already in bed?" Derek asks. "What time is it?"

"It's only 10:30," Kandace says, swinging her leg over the bike and putting her arms around her father's waist. "She's been going to bed early lately."

"But it's a Friday," Derek says.

"I know. She goes to bed early now."

Derek turns the key in the ignition. The bike erupts in a loud snarl, the sound shattering the silent night. He looks at his hand on the handle and watches it vibrate ever so slightly; the pulse of the bike radiates through his body.

He turns his head toward his right shoulder. "Do you mind if we go on a bit of a longer ride?" he shouts over the noise.

"That sounds good," Kandace calls back.

He pushes his toes off the cement and moves his feet to the foot pedals. The bike slips down the driveway and turns onto the black top, ten minutes behind the Monte Carlo's wake.

The autumn air flying past them is cool. Derek's long sleeved t-shirt occasionally makes that familiar flick from the air whipping past him. They drive in the dark tunnel past the baseball and softball diamonds, past Kandace's friend Jess's house, past the Shell gas station, and through the edge of town onto a gravel road.

Kandace leans towards Derek's ear. "Where are we going?" she asks.

"I want to show you something," Derek says.

"I don't care how far we go. It feels good."

They drive for another five minutes in silence. Derek feels Kandace shift her weight behind him again to yell in his ear.

"Darin's not going to Mankato," she says.

"Why?" Derek yells backwards.

"He's going to walk on at Iowa State," she yells. Then he feels her settle back in the seat, away from him.

They are driving slower now, since it is on the gravel. The smell of dust filters into their noses and a cloud of dust billows from the tires.

Ten minutes later, the river appears, twisting in a shallow valley on their right side. The dark trees stretch around and above it, almost blocking their view. But they see the glint of the stars in the water. The dark rolling of the current.

Derek finds what he was looking for and stops and turns off the bike. It has been over a year since he and Jennie had visited the old track, and he doesn't dare drive down there in the dark. He stares down the long, steep hill covered with knee-length weeds and grass. The slope stretches for about two hundred yards before it straightens out into a flat, football field-sized stretch of dirt. Long neglected by motorcycles, the track isn't visible anymore, especially in the dark.

The silence is odd after riding for twenty-five minutes on a motorcycle. They both know that it doesn't feel right to say anything just yet. So Kandace waits a half a minute before asking.

"What is this?"

Derek has been looking down the hill, reminiscing. He turns around to see that Kandace has taken her helmet off. Her messy bun falls at the nape of her neck, and wisps of sweaty hair stick around her forehead.

She gets off the bike. Derek puts the kickstand down and gets off too. He walks around and stands next to her, looking down on the track. He takes off his helmet. Takes a deep breath of fresh air.

"Did you used to race here?" she looks at him.

"Yep," he quips.

"Did you know that Darin's dad hates motorcycles?"

He chuckles as he says, "I don't really know Darin's dad that well, but from what I know of Plymouth people, they never really liked motorcycles."

She scolds him, "That's generalizing."

"I know," Derek answers, smiling. But of all the people he knew from Plymouth, he has only ever known two that didn't label him as a troublemaker for racing. "I met your mom here, you know."

"Yeah, when Uncle Jerry raced," Kandace smiles, and looks away.

They stare silently down the hill again for a full minute. But the air is pregnant, kicking against the flesh of what they don't say. What they can't say about her mother. About his wife. The dark night crushes down on them, making them feel like they can't breathe.

Kandace starts walking down the slope. "I want to look at it," she says quietly.

They stumble down the sloped hill together. The weeds whish as they step. The movement clears the air and gives Derek the courage. "Did Darin break up with you?"

"No," Kandace says, stepping ahead of him. "Where would people watch you guys from? When you were racing, I mean."

"Here, on the hill," he says.

His arm rises up on its own to point. He can't help himself. He sees her there, and he wants to tell his daughter. "Your mom usually sat..."

"Don't." She doesn't flinch, doesn't make a slight turn of her head to see where he was pointing.

They reach the bottom. Now that they are there, Derek realizes

that it isn't as bad as he expected it to be. The tire tracks are obviously gone. But the vague circular shape is still perceivable, though patches of grass stick up where they shouldn't, where they didn't before. They stand, looking down at their feet. In the dark, the vague shapes of two pointed cowboy boots and a pair of blue converse sneakers against a dirt and grass-veined backdrop.

Kandace starts walking around the ghost track. Derek follows her, their feet dislodging tiny rocks the only noise.

When they are a quarter of the way around, Derek says, "We used to race every Saturday night. Until the snow came, of course."

Kandace turns her head to him. He can't see her smile politely, but he knows she does. "Do you miss it?" she asks.

"No," he chuckles. "That was so long ago. High school."

Almost in a whisper she says, "It probably seems small now."

He nods. Everything does seem small now: the way he was when he was a teenager, the way the motorcycle vibrated when he raced, the way all the bikes snarled in harmony as they sped around the track. That seemed small, distant.

But the way Jennie used to laugh. The way she pulled her knees to her chest when she sat on the hill. How she'd defend Derek to her father, who thought she could do better. The way she touched him, her fingertips tickling past his forearm, raising the hair on his skin. Those all seemed so big.

He realizes that Kandace will do what she wants. The way Jennie did what she wanted, not what her father and mother wanted for her.

He realizes: Kandace is like him because she is internal, quiet. She is like Jennie because she always does what she wants.

They walk silently the rest of the way around the track. They stumble up the hill, then drive home in the cool dark.

They walk in the house together. All the lights are still on.

"I'm going to bed," Kandace says.

"Goodnight. Love you," he tells her.

"Love you too. Goodnight." And she goes down the stairs into her room in the basement.

He walks around, turns off all the lights. He changes out of his clothes, brushes his teeth in the bathroom, and goes downstairs to check on Amber.

The lights in the downstairs living room and the hallway are still on. He turns off the living room lights and walks down the hallway. Amber's room comes first on the left, and Kandace's is further down the hall on the right.

Derek cracks open Amber's door. The bar of light on the floor grows wider and higher in the room until it illuminates Amber's bed. She's sleeping. Kandace is lying next to her, awake.

"Dad?"

"I was just checking on Amber," he whispers.

"Can you turn off the light in the hall?" Kandace asks him quietly.

"Yes," he says. "Goodnight, Kandace."

"Night, Dad."

He shuts the door. He flips the light. He walks clumsily in the dark, feeling around for the corners that he should already know by heart, tripping up the stairs.

He crawls in between the crisp sheets. He has started making the bed, he never had to before. He likes the way it feels, crawling into a made bed. Like a fresh start. He stares up at the dark ceiling for a few minutes, but he isn't tired. He decides to read.

He turns on the lamp on his nightstand, and the light fills the room.

EMPTY SKY

by Allison Mulder

I sat in the field, baring my face toward the heavens as I watched the stars die. The warm summer breeze swept long hair off my neck. Grass tickled my palms and the soles of my feet. It might've been pleasant, if I hadn't been watching the world end.

A sea of ratty blankets and lawn chairs stretched out in all directions. Some stargazers were loud, like the group from my school, off to the right. They laughed and shouted, 'ooh'-ing and 'ah'-ing like it was the Fourth of July as they sprawled across each other, nudging and prodding and goofing off. I scrunched lower, hiding behind my hair.

Groups like that were rare. Most people were like me—quiet, and alone. Watching the stars blink out. Not talking, not making any sound. We just watched, and wondered, and waited.

An older couple sat to my left on a neat, clean blanket probably purchased just for the night. The woman hugged herself, like she was holding something in. The man had an arm around her shoulders and a tight, drawn expression...

...and an expensive-looking watch on his wrist. My fingers twitched.

Their clothes looked faded, washed out, but then again this wasn't some fancy, black-tie event. They'd probably worn the grubbiest clothes they owned. I plucked at stray threads on my worn, hole-dotted jeans, then turned my eyes back to the sky as the woman spoke.

"Can't they stop it?" she whispered. My classmates' raucous laughter faded as the group ambled toward the line of parked buses on the road. I think a few of them noticed me on the way out; they suddenly

went quiet, making the old woman's words seem volumes louder than before. "Don't they know what's causing it yet?"

A long silence followed. I didn't look at the couple again—too busy noticing how my retreating classmates held their bags and purses a little tighter than before—but the man with the watch probably shrugged, shook his head, squeezed her shoulder. Something.

Finally he spoke. "Don't worry, hon."

Don't worry. Right. No big deal. It was only the end of the universe.

"It takes thousands of years for the light from some of those stars to reach Earth," he said. "We'll be dead and gone long before whatever it is reaches us."

The woman let out a small, relieved sigh. Because of course he knew more than all the experts who babbled about science on the news, but had no clue how to fix things. Because who cared if her descendants and the rest of the human race saw the end of Earth, as long as she was six feet under when it happened.

Or maybe it was a dissatisfied sigh. Because she was smarter than her husband. Because she—like me and my friends online—had already realized that the disappearance of so many stars at once meant that whatever ended those stars was moving much, much faster than the speed of light.

Those stars didn't even exist anymore. They were dead. Ghosts, their light lingering on after their demise like the echoes of a screaming woman after she'd drawn her last breath.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star..." The song flashed through my mind. "How I wonder what you are... Up above the world so high. You leave behind an empty sky..."

I wanted to move. I wanted to run. Onto the road, back into the city, where the haze of civilization obscured the stars.

Fast, like I had when a cashier at that store last week gave me a funny look as I walked out. I'd pounded down the street, a bulge in my pocket and a light, free feeling in my chest.

But this field and the city were too far apart. I was no athlete; I measured distance traveled in city blocks, not miles. I'd be leaving on a shuttle bus, like most of the other gawkers who'd made the trip into the country to get one last look at the stars.

I didn't want to be like them—pathetic sheep who sat and watched because they couldn't stop it. But I was like them. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop anything. Starlight glanced off the man's watch, and my fingers twitched again.

I stuffed them into my pockets, forcing myself to look around at the other stargazers. Some had brought telescopes. Others, cameras. Everyone wanted to 'capture the moment' like the news anchors told them to. Everyone wanted to see the things their grandchildren might not be able to: stars, and polar bears. All the species teetering on the edge of extinction.

I didn't see the point. If some huge thing, event, whatever, was really out there destroying entire galaxies, who cared if you had footage of the last starry sky posted on your Facebook page?

And yet, I was there. Watching, just like everyone else. Helpless.

It wasn't like in the movies. In real life, there was no mission sending Earth's finest to battle the darkness. There was no unlikely team of heroes braving the final frontier and forging friendships along the way.

There was only waiting.

"I can't stand it anymore," the woman said with a shudder.

"Let's go home."

The couple got up and folded their blanket. The woman clutched her purse, and they picked their way toward the buses.

I pulled on my shoes and brushed myself off before following. I boarded the bus just after them, avoiding the eyes of the driver. He wasn't the one I'd ridden out with, but it never hurt to be careful. A scan of the occupied seats revealed no familiar faces—no one from school, or my neighborhood, or group therapy. An empty seat just behind the couple welcomed me.

Most of the passengers huddled like roosting birds, making up for lost sleep as we waited for the journey home to begin. They'd have work tomorrow, or school. Appointments, business meetings, tennis lessons at the country club. They hadn't really had time to come out to the boonies. But how many chances would they get?

How many more years, months, weeks, days would it be before even the ghosts faded and only the lights of satellites remained?

How long before those disappeared?

The bus coughed as it lumbered forward. People stirred and peeked past their eyelashes. I waited as they settled down, my best 'bored teenager' gaze skimming from seat to seat. But my eyes kept slipping back to the couple sitting in front of me.

The man snored, light gleaming on his watch. It flashed. Entrancing. Tempting, like almost everything else that caught my eye even once. I had to have it. I was meant to have it. I could almost see my reflection in the glass...

No. I stilled my itching fingers. Too conspicuous. Too risky. Too much, if I got caught again.

The woman leaned against the man with the watch as she slept, still and quiet and very grandmother-like. If I were the bus driver, I'd guess the two of them had grandchildren. Maybe a teenage granddaughter they took with them to stargaze. And if a girl followed them onto the bus, and sat by them, he'd probably assume she was related.

After all, who else but a granddaughter would reach forward and rummage through the sleeping woman's bag? No one outside the family would dare.

I took what I wanted from the purse, gritting my teeth as I slipped the small items into my sweatshirt pocket. Not the watch. At least I'm not taking the watch. I also snagged a stick of gum—ladies like her always carried gum, or mints, or something—and popped it halfway into my mouth, letting the driver and other passengers see the end. A bored granddaughter taking a stick of gum from her grandma's purse. Nothing odd about that.

I settled back, a pleasant buzz pooling at the base of my skull. I held in a smile, resting my head against the window as I stared at the farmland we passed. The feeling faded as a few more dots of light disappeared from the sky. The gum's flavor faded, too, until it tasted like I was chewing on an eraser.

The old man's snoring never missed a beat as he put his arm around the woman's shoulders. Again, light glinted off the face of his watch. A pinprick of brightness, just like a star. Gone as soon as it appeared.

I turned away from the window, the chilled glass cooling the back of my neck. My fingers tightened on the prizes in my pockets as the bus rolled on down the gravel road, and as the stars died behind me.

How long... How long...

"Twinkle, twinkle, little star..." A toddler across the aisle sang the tune under her breath, pressing her fingers against the windows as her mother paged through a magazine.

"How I wonder what you are..." Up above the world so high.

How long before an empty sky?

FEARING THE WOLF

by Joshua Klope

It was chilly that night, and the moon was full.

Damien couldn't remember the last time he'd seen a full moon. All he knew was it was cool. He gazed up at it through the glass. A perfect circle. You don't see those very often, but there it was in the sky, right there for everyone to see. Damien smiled. He liked it.

Just like a wolf. He knew wolves liked the moon, too. They were in some of the books he read—all the good ones, anyway. Wolves were cool, too. They were wise and lived in caves and sneaked around all the time, but they'd come out to get food, and they were really good at hunting. And you could only know a wolf was there if you looked really close.

Mom didn't think he should like wolves. She said they're dangerous and vicious. But Damien didn't think they were bad at all. He was pretty sure if you got to know a wolf and you were nice to him, he'd be nice to you. But the funny thing was that everyone stayed away from them, so they'd never know for sure.

Damien watched the full moon from the passenger seat of a silver two-door sports car. His father Roger was driving. Ten minutes ago they had walked out the doors of a cut-rate movie theater where they had enjoyed the premiere of the latest epic fantasy film. Roger didn't mind sitting through it. It was worth fueling his son's fiery imagination.

Their car glided through the night, down quiet city streets under deeply orange streetlights. Their destination was a department store downtown. Damien's mother Ann worked late there on weeknights, and every one of those nights Roger would drive to meet her there and take

her home. Some nights, such as tonight, Damien would accompany him, either out of necessity or on a sudden impulse. Roger would usually take his son in with him to tell Ann they had arrived, rather than leave him in the car. These days you never know what could happen to a kid alone at night.

They crossed the bridge over the river, passed the shifty bars and tattoo parlors, and entered the heart of the city, but as the scenery went by, the full moon remained curiously stationary as always, noble and constant in the rich black of the night sky. It flashed with pale brilliance in the gaps between the dark, ever-passing buildings, and its glow mixed with the amber streetlights on Damien's face. He remained transfixed. He'd bet five bucks there was a wolf somewhere howling at that moon right then.

Pretty soon his dad stopped the car. "All righty, we're here!"

The big store had bright lights inside. It looked warm in there. Damien popped his door open and jumped out. He beat his dad inside, which was always fun, even though his dad didn't try to race him. It made his leg hurt too much.

Damien had been here before. His mom worked here, so his dad liked to come here too because he got to pick her up and take her home, which is also why Damien liked coming here. The floor was shiny and it had long curvy lines on it, and he liked to be a spaceship on it. There were some spaceships in the toy section too. The toys here were cool. He went to look at the stuffed animals sometimes too, but just for the wolves, not the cute stuff.

Neither Damien nor his father ever knew how it happened. It may have been near the toy section where he liked to run off to, or perhaps somewhat later before the escalator, when they were separated. Roger, lost in thought about his wife Ann's tenuous hold on her job, neglected to look back in the thirty seconds it took to ride the escalator to

the second floor. When he reached the top, he discovered his son was not there. He raced back down the moving steps, but he did not realize the boy was already on the other side of the store, in search of him.

The department store was large, and Damien was becoming desperately afraid that he was lost. Feeling more frantic every second, he finally burst out into the chilly night through the front doors. Maybe his mom and dad were waiting in the car for him.

But they weren't.

Damien tugged at the car door handle. It was locked. His dad always locked it when he got out. He fought with the handle, pulled it hard, again and again. But it wouldn't budge.

It wasn't fair. Damien was breathing hard. His thoughts were all tripping over each other. He closed his eyes and thought hard. But he was too scared to think. What next?

"Hey, kid. You tryin' to get somewhere?"

Damien snapped around. At first he didn't see him, but there was a man there, standing in the dark next to the store. He was wearing an old ripped jacket and really muddy pants. Damien didn't like him. He looked mean.

The man walked out into the light from the windows. "That car's locked, I'd say. You know whose it is?"

Damien turned back to his dad's car and didn't say anything.

"Do you know where you are?"

Damien stared.

"Where's your mom and dad?"

Damien bit his lip.

"Hey kid, come on." The man sat down against the car beside Damien. "Are you lost?"

"No," he said quickly.

"Oh, you're not. So that's why you're making off with

someone's car." He chuckled softly.

Damien relaxed a little. The chuckling made him seem nicer.

"It's a nice night, isn't it?"

He looked over cautiously and saw that the man was looking up. Damien did, too. It was the moon! "Do you like the moon, too?"

"The moon? It's one of my favorite things," the man said, smiling.

Damien wasn't afraid of the man now. He must be okay. "Who are you?" he wanted to know.

"Me?" He shrugged. "Nobody really. Name's Eduardo. Or Ed, if you like."

"But what's your real name?"

The man frowned.

"Because sometimes, if someone's big and important, they disguise themselves as someone else."

"Oh, I see," he said, his eyes twinkling. "You caught me. I'm really Sir William, Ranger of the City and Wizard of the Moon."

Damien grinned. "I'm Merlin," he said defiantly.

"Merlin? Really? I've met my match, then. How is your mastery of spells, Sir Merlin?"

"I'm Merlin, I know 'em all!"

"You're right, I should have known." He chuckled again. "Well, if you know so many spells, you must know where your mom and dad are."

He shook his head quietly.

"Are they in the store here?" He pointed.

Damien frowned. "I think so," he said finally, "But I don't wanna go back in there. I'll get lost again."

"I see."

They sat there against the car for a while, staring up at the

moon. A breeze whipped lightly at them, making the night seem chillier. Damien pulled his arms inside his jacket and huddled tight. "What do you do?" he wondered.

"Huh?"

"What's your job?"

"Oh." The man smiled gently. "I don't have one."

"Everybody has a job," Damien protested.

"Not everyone, Merlin. You don't have a job, do you?"

"No...but I'm not old enough." He looked at the man. "Then how do you make money?"

"Money isn't for everyone, either. It has a lot of its own problems, you know."

This did not make sense to Damien. "But...don't you want a job?" For some reason he felt bad for the man.

"Oh, I guess I do." He looked in the store windows. "It's been so long, I'm not always sure I do. But sometimes you try and no one wants you to work for them."

"Why not?"

"That's very hard to explain."

Damien sighed. Sometimes grown-ups don't make any sense. "But then what do you do all day?"

"Well, I guess most days I find food for myself. Sometimes I have to walk a very long time to find it, but I always find it in the end. I collect cans, too—they'll pay you for those, you know. And sometimes I sit, like we are now." He peered at the boy. "What's wrong?"

Damien wasn't sure. He felt sad. "Don't you have any friends?" he asked softly.

"Well...I used to. Sometimes I think about them a lot, which always makes me feel better. It's the memories that count."

Damien stared at the pavement. "Why don't people like you?"

The man considered that. "Well—I think a lot of people are just afraid, so they stay away."

"Afraid of you?" He was surprised.

"No. Just...afraid. A lot of people are like that." He nudged Damien, grinning. "But not you."

"I could be your friend, if you want," he replied in a small voice.

The man smiled that warm smile of his. "That would make me very happy, Merlin."

"My real name is Damien."

"All right. Damien." He stood up. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Damien started to follow but looked hesitantly at the store.

"But..."

"It'll only take a few minutes. Then we'll come back. Promise."

The man led him into the alleyway next to the store. Several flights of metal stairs zigzagged up the dark side of the building toward a thin strip of sky above. Damien followed curiously. But when they reached the top and he saw the man walk out onto the roof of the building, Damien stopped. "We're not supposed to be here," he warned.

"We aren't causing trouble. Come on! Don't be afraid."

Reluctantly, he left the final metal step and set foot on the roof. It wasn't so bad up here, he decided. He joined the man near the edge of the building—and gasped.

The city sprawled out before them. A vast ocean of artificial stars beneath the deep black sky, with the golden pinpricks of cars rippling its surface in calm, sparse currents. Through the center of this humble terrestrial galaxy was the river, crossed in several places by the city's bridges, and its surface reflected not only the streaming banners of light from skyscrapers and factories but also the serene solitude of the full moon. In the turbulent earthly water it was but a fractured, shifting

image of the perfect circle above.

"I come up here a lot," the man said, surveying the scene. "It helps to see everything in a different way, especially for me."

Damien was taking it all in, and his fiery imagination ignited at every detail.

"The world is a big place," the man went on. "It has more people and places and problems than most people realize. That might be part of the problem. People don't see this." He spread his arms out toward the dim, twinkling city. "Not the way we do. They don't see because they don't look. So they don't understand." He sat down reverently. "It's important to see things this way. Remember that."

They stayed there for some time, both gazing silently across the cityscape. After a while, on an unspoken agreement, they decided they should go back. They descended the metal steps into the alleyway and emerged together in front of the department store. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Finally Damien's voice returned. "What did you say your name was?"

"Ed."

He looked up at him. "Can I call you Wolf?"

The man frowned. "Wolf?" He considered it. "Yeah...yeah, I like that. It sort of fits. Thanks, Damien." He extended his hand. "Friends?"

Damien didn't know why, but his eyes were getting teary. He blinked and took the hand. It was surprisingly gentle. "Yeah," he mumbled.

"Now." He knelt down on Damien's level. "I want to tell you something, listen because it's very important. Pretty soon, you're gonna grow up, and people are gonna try to make you a certain way. But you can't let them, okay? Because you are just the kind of person this world needs."

Damien did not understand, but he nodded and listened carefully.

"We're all the same, you know. We all breathe the same air."

He pointed up. "We all look at the same moon, and wonder why. No one is any better than anyone else. And you have that figured out." He put a hand on Damien's shoulder. "So I want you to remember something, okay?"

He nodded again.

"Stop. Look around you. Feel. Never miss out on the world because it's right there in front of you. And always, above all, remember to listen. Because people need you, and people are always worth listening to." He looked right at Damien. "Can you do that?"

"I—I think so."

Wolf smiled and patted his shoulder. "Good."

"Hey!"

Damien whipped around. A man was running down the sidewalk toward them. Damien called out. "Dad!"

"That's your dad?" Wolf got to his feet suddenly. "I'd better take off."

"What? Why?"

"Someday you'll understand." He started moving away, watching the approaching figure warily.

"Where—will I see you again?"

"I'll be around. Stay safe, Damien!" And he took off running, faster than Damien had ever seen anyone run before.

"Yeah, you better run!" Roger stopped beside Damien. He had been shouting furiously, from the moment he saw that man with his hands all over his son. "Get outta here! Back to the box where you belong!"

"Dad," Damien said, tugging his father's sleeve.

His dad dropped to his knees in front of Damien. "Where have

you been?" he choked. He looked sad, and worried.

Damien mumbled. "Well, I got lost, and then I met Wolf here, and I—"

"You mean you—" his dad crushed him in a big, sad bear hug. "Oh, son. We need to have a talk about strangers. For now, though... your mom's looking for us."

His mom's hair was all crazy like it was whenever she got stressed. She gave him a bear hug, too, and it seemed like she was sad and mad and scared all at the same time. Then they all went back to the car together and headed home.

"How did you two get separated?" his mom asked as they rode.

"I don't know. That part was my fault." His dad's eyes appeared in the mirror. "But Damien? You must never go off with strangers. Do you understand?"

"But Dad, Wolf isn't—"

"I said, do you understand!"

His dad almost never yelled at him. "Yeah," he said finally.

"Who is Wolf?" his mom asked quietly.

"I don't know. Some idiot had him when I got there. Touching him, Ann. His hands were...all over him. The scum in this city, I swear...."

Damien stared sadly at the moon as they drove back over the bridge. He knew he couldn't change his dad's mind, but Wolf was good. He had only touched his shoulder, and he was so nice. If only people would give him a chance.

If only people would look, they would see....

The full moon lit the dark interior of their car that night as they drove quickly and quietly home.



Sarah Odom, "Quirk"

STALKING

by Tyler Farr

You have done it; you have finally found the perfect spot. Not to say that your previous spots were not sufficient, but this is the ideal location. She is right there, the human Glenda—you can see everything she is doing—and she has no possible way of seeing you. You continue to formulate your plan by studying her. You can't wait to finally kill her—to watch as her final breath leeches from her lungs.

Hidden away in this dark recess, you watch as she makes her meal. It smells like some rich and succulent chicken that has been lying in a tub of honey and you wish that you could just run up and snatch a piece without her noticing. Instead, you need to deal with your foul smelling rations. The idea of scarfing down yet another bowl of that congealed gruel sickens you. You'd rather eat your own hair than eat that gelatinous slop, but you must stay strong in order to complete your mission.

If only her life was confined to this one room, then you would be able to carry out your plan more quickly. This spot makes it easy to formulate a new strategy; Dog doesn't even know that you are here. All day you can watch as she goes about her day-to-day life and you can even take a nap undisturbed. Once you accomplish your mission there will be no more hiding in the deep shadows, lurking around corners, and sucking up to your target, purring and preening. If you could somehow manipulate the idiotic canine, you might be able to trick Dog into helping you kill her...

She has some sharp objects, and is using them to cut up some strangely colored food that smells of dirt. Maybe she will choke on the stuff and leave the chicken to you. You like that thought because you could finally be free of her tyranny. Maybe while she is watching the

light-up box you can drop something on her, like that bulbous heavy lamp that she likes so much, or sit on her head while she sleeps until she stops breathing. She has no idea what you are capable of. She should have taken the hint when you presented her with your freshest kill the other day. The mouse didn't have a chance as you had cornered it and crushed its small form with your powerful jaw.

All of the others think that you are crazy, flipping psychotic. They are content to serve her, their master, eat their food without complaint, and sleep in the open. What fools they are. They don't know what they are really capable of. They are just like Dog, who has slobber for brains. Don't they wish to know the true smell off freedom? You alone can free them.... Or kill them if they're stunted enough not to want freedom. The brain-dead, shit-eating canine is like that; I can only pray that the rest of my kind is not as hopeless as Dog.

Your mission almost came to a close the other day when you almost made Glenda fall down the stairs. Dog was smarter than you thought it was, however, and Glenda turned to pet the canine before you could twist around her ankles. Thankfully the human is still completely in the dark. She thinks you are God's gift to the world, with your gorgeous, silky fur and deep contented purr. Well, she does have one thing right, you are to be worshiped. Too bad she won't realize your true intentions before you kill her.

You flex your claws instinctively, waiting to spring down from your hiding spot the moment that she turns her back. You watch with wide green, florescent eyes as she moves to look out the window. Her face goes stony as she hurriedly closes the blinds and dashes toward the front door. You leap from your hiding spot and follow along closely, analyzing this new behavior.

Dog begins to pace around, hackles raised. It lets out a small fart in anticipation and fear. Glenda quiets Dog and goes back to her cooking.

You shrug off the abnormality and head for your basement lair again. She never finds you down there, and there will be no new information to be gathered tonight. Tomorrow will be the day. You curl up and drift off in the dark corner by the water heater.

Later, you awaken, thirsty. As you approach the stairs, you are aware that the lights are still on. Odd. You prance up the stairs and take a drink out of your green water dish situated by the giant machine that stores and cools food. Mercifully it is still unviolated? by the canine's rancid slobber. As you step back your paw is submerged into a small pool of thick liquid, making you jump. You sniff the pool; it smells of salt and rust. Your first thought is that she didn't clean up dinner, and then your eyes fall on the open back door and pair of feet jutting out on the ground from the wall. You glance around the kitchen to find more pools and smears of the strange substance on the walls and floor; and the sharp object that she was using to cut dirt earlier is covered in it.

Curious, you pad over to her, careful to avoid the numerous stains, and glance around the corner. She looks like she's asleep, her arms splayed out to her sides and eyes closed. You wonder where Dog is. You turn to find that the back door is wide open and the brisk night air is calling to you—making your blood sing, similar to when the human gives you catnip. You glance back at Glenda and softly place a paw on the back of her neck, careful not to wake her. Her skin feels cold to the touch and her body is beginning to smell like the pools in the kitchen. Realizing that this is your chance to escape, you bound off toward the door and into the night, never looking back.

IGNITE

by Jocelyn Van Dyke

His shadow folds into an ugly, stinking creature when he goes out to the alley for a light. Emily won't ever admit that she secretly likes the taste of the smoke when he comes back in and goes to bed with her. Smells of sex and cigarette smoke bring back distorted memories. His nasty habit is what draws her to him, what reminds her of her father.

When they met, she told him her father died because of the cigarettes. She was sure that, naturally, he assumed her father had died of lung cancer. What he doesn't know is that her father was actually having one of his "episodes" and decided to douse himself in gasoline while the end of a lit cigarette hung out of his mouth. Telling him this is something she'll never do.

Most of the time when she talks to him he doesn't listen. Today, she's spent the entire morning explaining to him that she's feeling well enough to go outside again. It's a sunny day. Yes, the white walls are bright, but she misses the warmth that artificial light can't provide. Warmth and sunshine and fresh air.

"Emily, I'm trying to help you," he said. "Are you listening to me?"

Her eyes flashed from the window she had been staring out of to the crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. Her gaze went to his temples, where gray hairs peppered his dark locks, reminding her of ashes. It suddenly occurred to her that she didn't know when this aging had begun.

"When did your hair start to gray?"

"Emily," he sighed. "I asked if you're ready to tell me what happened that day. I need you to tell me the truth."

She noticed the clipboard then; the one that was sitting on his

lap. He was tapping the blue ballpoint pen on his knee.

She averted her eyes from his, and out of habit, began picking at the scabs that littered her arms. Her arms bore the marks of 15 cigarette burns. She hadn't even been able to get to 16. The cop had pulled the smoldering stick and lighter from her hand before she could finish and round things out to an even number. Every day that perplexed her. She was uneven, imperfect.

He slowly reached forward and gently placed her hand in her lap, palm up. With that single movement, she caught a trace of cigarette smoke as it wafted off his clothes, saw the burned skin of her wrist.

In that moment, the cotton of her shirt was too hot, the snaps on the side of her sleeve too heavy. She remembered her "episode." "That day" she'd violently splashed gasoline on her father. And in the same aggressive motion, she'd lit a match and flicked it. Her father had never smoked a cigarette in his life, but his body will look like the end of one right after she touches the flame to him in her mind, again, and again, and they both ignite.

WARMING

by Ashlee Koedam

The screen door never latches. It continues to slam against the frame and creak in the wind as you sit at your desk, indifferent to the door, because he has just left, and you are wondering if he will come back this time.

As you sat at your desk grading papers, he kissed you goodbye, cheerfully. You felt the dampness of his inner lips against your cheek and the warm breath from his mouth as he kissed the back of your ear and breathed down your neck. The breath made you shiver, even though it was warm. You wonder if she had felt all this in the same way.

You are grading online and type a correction in a student's paper. Comma splice, you type in the review margins.

You have lived in the apartment for five years now. Have lived in it since he graduated from the community college, while you commuted the hour, every day, to the university in the city because you still had two years left. You told yourself you didn't mind. You told yourself it was worth it coming home to the small, cold apartment late at night, kicking off your shoes and socks at the door, walking barefoot across the icy, uncarpeted floor (The cold was like dipping your feet into a winter lake just before it made ice, it started at the soles and traveled quickly to the rest of you—your knees, chest, arms. Freezing.). Crawling into bed next to your husband's warm body was worth the drive. You told yourself this. But you hate driving, always have.

You finish the student's paper and shiver, grab the afghan blanket draped over the chair, and wrap its scratchiness around your shoulders. Another layer, at least. You put water on the stove for tea. He made you buy a teakettle. You don't mind microwaving water for tea, but he said that microwaves had bad health side effects. You don't

remember what he said they were anymore. You just bought the kettle, and now you use it.

As the water heats, you go back to your computer and type in the Google search bar (your arms like awkward snowman limbs, sticking out of the puke green afghan). "Houses for sale in Plymouth." You still do this, even now, as a habit. As the computer thinks, you move your fingers gently along the keyboard. The heat from the laptop warms them somewhat.

You know she has a house and know she owns it. You know this because everyone knows everything about everyone else here. You know where her house is, know that her neighbors have seen your husband walk into the house on Thursday nights, when he is supposed to be at the bar for dart league. You imagine him walking into the house. He would wait until dark, because even he is not that stupid. He gets out of his car, non-stealthily, and walks with confidence up to her door. (He always walks this way, despite his overweight body and horribly obvious receding hairline. To yourself, you've made fun of this confidence when he is not there. But only to yourself. And only when he is not there). He doesn't knock but walks right in. You imagine them snorting cocaine—a crystal pile of snow blurring into their noses—before they have sex. You imagine him leaving when they're done.

The kettle whistles like a sharp wake-up call. As you walk by the door, it creaks then pounds in the wind again.

You pour yourself water, letting the tea bag steep and stand over the stove, waiting for the water to take on the sweet, spiced flavor of tea.

When you had first started teaching, you were in a regular classroom. It was what you had been waiting for, for four years. But when he heard of the high school academy that served both accelerated and lagging students via the Internet, he thought it was exciting and innovative. He told you to apply, and you did, and you got the job.

And you've hated it. You didn't know your students, didn't get to have conversations with them. You didn't get to decorate a classroom. You didn't get to walk around and move your arms and slam your palms on students' desks for emphasis. You missed seeing the ideas click in their brains. You missed how you could tell you had hit that sweet spot of teaching, when students forget that they are learning, by the way they edged to their seats in a lesson. You missed writing "comma splice" on white paper with a purple pen, instead of typing it in a generic Times New Roman font without the curvy, upbeat personality of your handwriting.

The job paid better than your old job. And he had said that it would give you more free time to keep up the house (the house?!).

You take the tea bag out of the cup. You let the tea drip off of the bag as you hold it over the sink. You look into your cup and think about how the tea won't ever be water again, but the bag is essentially the same, just wet.

The tea is still too hot to drink, so you set down your mug and pull the dusty shades to let in the sunlight. Dust motes drift in front of the window. You retrieve your mug and stare outside as you hold the cup up to your face so the steam warms your cheeks. The laziness of cinnamon and the bite of jasmine fill your nose.

It almost looks warmer and sunnier out there than it does in your apartment.

You feel a warmth down your back. You feel warm all over, an inside warmth, deeper than when he breathed on you this morning, deeper than the way the hot mug felt on your frigid hands. But the thermostat next to the window only reads 61. You shuck off the afghan and set down the tea. You wonder why you are suddenly warm and happy.

Then you wonder why you've never thought about leaving, because now, for the first time, you're thinking about it.

DROWNING LOVE

by Jocelyn Van Dyke

She thought her bones might break with the weight of imprisonment. Ian, her son, had just come into her life. When Anna had first found out she was pregnant, she wasn't scared at all. She waited for Elliot to come home from work so she could tell him the happy news. She knew exactly how the situation would play out: After she told him, he would sweep her up into one of his giant bear hugs, kiss her neck, and ask her to marry him. They'd have a small wedding, and then live happily ever after, raising their child.

But Anna wasn't meant to have her fairytale ending. It had been two years since Elliot walked out the white screen door. At first she thought that he might return for Ian's first birthday. But with the advent of his second party, she knew she was foolish to hope for a perfect, whole family. She was on her own.

Things hadn't been easy in the last two years, but today, the struggles of being a single parent were weighing especially heavy on her. She felt trapped, like she was caught in the dark and couldn't find the light no matter how hard she tried. There were times when she felt so suffocated by Ian's every want and need that it was all she could do to keep from pulling out her own hair, screaming, and shattering every glass dish in her tiny kitchen.

Today, she was in the upstairs bathroom, giving Ian his nightly bath. She was exhausted from the twelve-hour day working at the deli making sandwiches for snotty teenagers who used their parents' money to pay. She was sick of the landlord asking for rent. She was just tired of feeling tired. She hurried to lather soap in the boy's hair so she could get him off to bed because her patience was running out. Her rushed movements resulted in soap sliding down his forehead and into his eyes.

The strawberry-scented soap stung and, Ian began to cry. It's really not that bad, she thought, but his whimpers continued until he was nearing hysterical meltdown. Stop it, she growled, and shook him once. This only made him cry more. This ear-splitting noise has got to stop. Attempting to wash the soap from his eyes, she began dumping handfuls of water over his head. Frantically, she splashed water in his face, trying to free the soap. Why won't you stop crying? I need to use more water. More water. She dunked him under quickly then, and by this time Ian was screeching and flailing his tiny arms. She dunked him a second time, this time holding him under a moment longer. For a second, it was quiet. But when she pulled him up, he gulped for air and began screaming again. Quiet. I need quiet! Each time she plunged his body under the water in the tub she held him down longer and longer. Seven times. She counted. And each time his head went under, she kept him there a minute longer.

When everything was still, she looked down at the hands that held her son's limp little body. Picking him up, folding loose legs and limbs into a bundle, she grabbed a towel and slowly made her way to the bedroom. Sinking into the down comforter, she cradled his frame and stared with empty eyes at the boy's damp curls. With the scent of strawberries in her nostrils, Anna wrapped up her son's cold, wet body, slid under the sheets, and went into hibernation.

*Right: Keely Wright, "Urin This Moment,"
"Urin a Tea Party" and "Urinapocalypse"*



creative
NON-FICTION

Judge's Note

In her poem "Ghosts," Mary Oliver asks the question, "Have you noticed?" four times; the phrase becomes a poetics of seeing. In "Circle of Seasons," Kelly Burds' vision is clear and powerful. She explores the flowers, the birds, and finally the complex meaning of home and its relationship to identity. "I start to whistle an old hymn about how God watches out for even little brown birds like me," she writes.

Home means family, too. In "The First Holiday," Kyle Rubel sees, and shows, his grandmother spilling her Bloody Mary on Thanksgiving, as she mistakes Kyle for his uncle who has just committed suicide. Later, when she comes to, his grandma asks, "Kyle, will you take me home?" He answers, "yeah," and "wraps her arm around [him] as [they]...pace" and she "fumbles the whole way," as we all fumble our way toward home in uncertain times.

Kali Wolkow has her hands full, too, as she recalls caring for a cranky Vietnam vet in a nursing home. Everett pushes her away as hard as he can, but she breaks the bitterness with love, and hears the magic phrase, "Thank you," before one day walking into Everett's room and finding it empty.

CIRCLE OF SEASONS

by Kelly Burds

*I sing because I'm happy,
I sing because I'm free,
For His eye is on the sparrow
And I know He watched me.*

Spring

The little house sparrow flies into the just budding maple tree, chattering to its kin as it assesses its new abode for the year; the old hedge to the west was getting too crowded with family members who enjoyed the relative safety of the human nesting grounds, where there were fewer egg-predators, except for the squirrels and the occasional blue jay, and the only things that attacked the grown-ups were the cats. He is a chipper little fellow, happy to have found a nesting spot and eager to find a mate, if he can. I watch him from my second floor bedroom window, then rush outside to see what blooms are out. Last time I was home, it was the purple crocus, sometimes budding before all the snow melts, and the little blue flower, siberian squill, which has been popping up all over our yard in a carpet made of sky since before we owned this house. Now, I can smell the lilacs before I even step outside, accidentally frightening another sparrow, this one a female (maybe she's single?), out of the bird-bath. The first of my mother's beloved babies is viola tricolor, also known as Johnny-jump-up or Heartsease, one of Shakespeare's most referenced flowers, and the progenitor of the cultivated pansies growing nearby. I kneel down to kiss their adorable little faces, beloved since early childhood for the simple fact that they are purple, even more beloved now for their symbolism of both heart and mind. I wander down the driveway to check on the little grape hyacinth

plant that was put in three years ago. Next to it sits the bachelor's button, also known as cornflower. The two are nearly identical shades of blue, and while I don't know them as well, they still make me smile. I double back to cross the front yard, admiring the bright green new growth on the evergreen bushes framing the never-used front door and avoiding the purple irises, which look pretty but smell like grape kool-aid. To banish even the thought of the smell, I cross underneath the linden tree and bury my nose into the gorgeous scent of the lilac bush again. Nothing on earth smells as good, except perhaps the scent of fresh-out-of-the-oven cheesecake crust. As I round from the east to the south side of the house, I am happy to realize I'm back home in time to see the last of the daffodils, jonquils, and tulips in their full glory before they begin their descent into wilted death, at least until next year. I don't even make it to the backyard before I stop, sitting next to the lily of the valley, imagining I'm smelling Eden itself, when I realize that all my indicators of spring in Iowa aren't native. Everything, from the sparrows to the heartsease to the lilacs to the little white bells of the lilies in front of me, is an import from Europe. Then, I look a little farther and I see trillium. Beautiful and delicate, and damaging to the plant to pick, trillium is indicative that not all species in this garden I love are invasive. Trillium is native to Iowa, although the state is isolated from every other place in North America where trillium grows. And anyway, these species are like me: they are not native by genetic code, but they grew in this soil, and that is enough. I start to whistle an old hymn about how God watches out for even little brown birds like me, happy to be at home and free to do as I please.

Summer

As if she doesn't work hard enough at the job she actually gets paid for, Mumzy spends all her free time in the summer keeping the evil, evil dandelions from taking over the back yard and everything else. It's

sort of a pity that they're a garden plant and make a fantastic salad in Europe, but are nothing but an irritating weed here. While my statuesque mother darts about with the trowel of death to destroy her herbaceous fo before they seed, a petite ruby-throated hummingbird flies, backwards, no less, towards the towering red beebalm that was planted specifically for it. In front of the beebalm, a bit shorter but far showier, are the only annuals Mom is willing to plant, zinnias. They have graced her garden nearly every year but one, when she insanely thought maroon and white petunias were a good idea. The plot looked like a funeral that summer, and she has since stuck with the zinnia seeds she harvests every year. Deadheading will do you so much good in the long run. Sitting in the shade in the hammock with a library book I've read a million times and still love to death, I watch the little hummingbird fly away from the beebalm, past the ferny-looking tansy, which will need to be whacked back yet again with a vengeance to keep it from getting so huge for a while, and on to the feeder, then back up the way I just came, past the linden tree and its too-cute-for-words watermelon bird house, from which can be heard the adorable peeps of fledgling robins. I turn back around and look towards the plot Mumz is digging in, I see poppies, poppies, and more poppies, orange and fluttery in the summer breeze as a butterfly's wing. At this point I abandon any hope of getting some reading done outside: the gnats are driving me crazy in the shade, I can't find the sunscreen so no spending hours in direct sunlight, and I can practically hear the flowers calling my name. I get up and walk south towards neighbor Nancy's yard, the only way to actually get at one of the plots. As the hostas chill in the shade, the hollyhocks tower above me in gorgeous gradients of red and pink. Beside them are the dark blue columbines, which are not to be confused with honeysuckle, since you can bite the bottom off of honeysuckle to suck out nectar and columbine is poisonous. The next plot, which is now connected as Mum keeps

expanding her beds in an effort to have less mowing to do, is full of nothing but peonies. I avoid the buds, having no desire to be crawled upon by ants, and take a whiff of the big white bloom in front of me. Now, I have a mission impossible moment: cross back into my own yard without stepping on plant life, on pain of eardrum blowout by "what did you do?!" If only I could fly.

Autumn

My brother had to get up early for school today, and I got to sleep in because I'm on break. Waking up some time before noon, I am lulled into thinking it is a warm day by the sunshine outside. This opinion holds for exactly three seconds before a gust of wind reminds me that it is most definitely not summer anymore. I swear, the blue jay across the street hears my squeal of cold and the little mischief maker laughs at me. I stick my tongue out at him and rush back towards warmth. After hurriedly pulling on a sweatshirt, I run to the only garden plot that doesn't actually get used for gardening, and, sure enough, some of the pumpkin seeds from last year's jack-o-lantern, thrown into the composter with the rest of the plant biodegradables, sprouted and actually bore fruit, as did what appears to be some sort of squash. I walk along the east border of our yard, enjoying the fact that one of our maples is still green. The other two, however, are brilliant sunset shades that make me feel like raking a pile together and jumping in. I refrain when I remember that our rake is broken. To console myself, I stop by the herb garden on my way back up to the front of the house, picking some fresh basil, oregano, chive, and parsley to put in the tomato soup I want to make for lunch, a nostalgic piece of childhood that will almost certainly include making popcorn to throw into the soup instead of boring old crackers. As I look out at the street, I see the leaves of the linden tree fall, and realize that, despite the best effort of humans, since even insectivores like blue jays

won't eat them, those darn Japanese beetles attacked the tree again this year, rendering many of the upper leaves into heart-shaped lace. I catch one as it heads toward my face, sliding it into my pocket to press in my journal later. Despite the destruction, the lace leaves are pretty. I pluck one of the last of the black-eyed susans, the only plant still flowering, and tuck it behind my ear. I'll tell Deni the story about how warm it looked outside when he comes home, he'll probably think it's funny too.

Winter

Our entire yard, from the blue spruce at the bottom of the backyard to the sidewalk in front, is covered in nearly a foot of snow, and I'm the only one home to shovel it all. Pulling on a parka, earmuffs, mittens and boots, I muse about the poetic rightness of having flowerbeds covered in blankets of snow. Then I grab the shovel, avoiding the snowblower because it's too heavy for me to use. I start at the garage, remembering when we had a pair of holly bushes just to the south of it. I look up to see that somehow the glass cardinal figurine that sits in the birdbath is still there, despite the water being completely frozen. It's the closest I've seen to a live cardinal in ages; they are too good at hiding, and since we stopped putting out birdseed because we keep getting moths infesting the seed and then our house, they have no reason to show themselves in the yard. It is then I remember the date: December 11. Two weeks until Christmas, and the day Mom has a slightly sad nostalgia to her smile when she comes home. Though no one will say anything, we'll all be thinking about the other red "burd(s)" we haven't seen in a long time. God, I can't believe it's been fifteen years. Dad never saw this house, never saw my sixth birthday, never saw Denis, who was called Den-Den back then, start school. Standing in the snow with my shovel poised to dump onto the exact spot where the grape hyacinth is, I wonder if he would approve of the choices I've made in this life. I

pray he would, or if he wouldn't approve, would at least accept. Just as I think this, I see a flash of scarlet as a pair of cardinals take off from the ornamental tree in the neighbor's yard. I take that as my answer, and start humming (it's too cold to whistle) that same old hymn about birds.

THE FIRST HOLIDAY

by Kyle Rubel

The Call

His arched eyebrows and umbrella of a mouth tell us he had a hard day at work, and that we should let him rest. Each step he takes closer to the house causes his back to curve a little more. He walks in the house and goes directly to the bathroom, barely mumbling a word to anyone as he passes. My dad is a loving man, but has a hard time showing it after a long day of work.

The phone rings in the background, and my mom jumps to answer it. "Hello?" I hear her say from the other room. "Just a second. He just walked in. Gary, it's for you."

My dad walks out of the bathroom and takes the phone from her. "Hello? This is. Uh-uh," he gets out before taking a long pause. "Are you sure? When did this happen? Okay, thank you." He hangs up the phone and slowly collapses into his recliner. His hands meet his face as he softly whimpers to himself. The whimpers become hard cries.

"Gary, what's wrong?" my mom asks as she rubs his back in comfort.

"David just committed suicide," he answers through his tears. My mom takes a beat before she joins in the sobbing. This is the first time I've seen my dad cry.

The First Thanksgiving

I walk up to my sister's house anxious to see my family today. It's the first holiday since my uncle David's death, so I know they will need cheering up. I'm always the comic relief. As soon as I walk in the door I see my grandma holding a giant Bloody Mary. Her tear kissed f

lets me know that it isn't her first one.

"How are you, Grandma?" leaves my mouth without my brain processing it. *How is she? It's the first holiday after her son's suicide. How the hell do you think she is?*

"Oh, David, I missed you," she cheers as she gives me a strong embrace, causing some of her Bloody Mary to slide down my back.

"I'm not David," I try to tell her.

"It's okay, David. I'm not mad at you." I decide to let her have this instance of happiness. Even though it's a lie. "Come see everyone. They've been talking about how they missed you." She leads me around the house chanting "David's here" as she takes each step.

"That's not David; it's Kyle," my mom shouts to her, causing the chanting to cease. My grandma looks at me again. This time in the eyes. "Oh, Kyle. Sit down and eat." That momentary halt to her tears, and all light leaves the room. I follow my grandma's orders, hoping it might cheer her up a little. "I miss David," my grandma calls out from the living room. "Maybe if you weren't such a bad mother he wouldn't have killed himself," my mom snaps back at her. "Maybe you should been there for him when he was lonely," my grandmother shouts back at her. They continue shouting at each other, increasing volume with each sentence. My sister, Lindsey, and I look at each other with distain. Our eyes widen; this is our signal to step outside. I light up a cigarette, telling myself that it will calm me down.

"We're a fucked up family, aren't we?" I ask her.

"Yeah, but what family isn't these days?" she replies in her soft voice.

"Is this how death always is?"

"Sometimes. Depends on the person."

"Does it ever get easier?" I ask her, more stressed than I was before we stepped outside.

"Not really. It just slowly starts hurting less, but one day you wake up and realize there is still more to life," she comforts.

I try to think about when that day will come. It doesn't seem likely that it will be any time soon. Lindsey and I decide we shouldn't leave my mom and grandma alone any longer. We are shocked when we walk into the house and see my mom and grandma hugging and apologizing to each other.

"Kyle, will you take me home?" my grandma asks me.

"Yeah," I shout back. I wrap her arm around me as we slowly pace to my car. She fumbles the whole way there. I guide her into her seat before closing the car door. We remain silent until we arrive at her house. I stop her before she gets out.

"Grandma, I know it's hard now, but one day the pain will go away," I tell her, paraphrasing Lindsey's words. A slight grimace makes a cameo on her face before she exits.

EVERETT

by Kali Wolkow

One

The living room smelled like bad food and cheap disinfectant that wasn't quite able to hide the odor of bodily fluids and old people. The floor was cold, white tile that was so scuffed it looked gray. And the walls were papered with a peach floral that could have only been manufactured in the seventies. Three haphazard rows of vinyl chairs faced the television on which *Jeopardy* reruns were playing. And a floor to ceiling glass aviary occupied the far corner of the room.

Three old men, five old ladies, and one ancient Raggedy Ann doll filled the vinyl armchairs. Four residents were sleeping—heads bowed, mouths open, spit drooling—their slumber sprinkled with an occasional wheeze, whimper, or moan. Three others were staring in the direction of the television, but weren't actually watching it. Their minds weren't entertained by Art Fleming's friendly banter or even aware that he was speaking. Their minds were blank slates, erased by the passage of years. Others were sad, memory-keepers of days gone by—their minds were glossed over with memories of cooking and cleaning with a child on their hip, birthdays and homemade cakes, 50th anniversaries, and that first Volkswagen Beetle they ever purchased free and clear. Their eyes were sad. Their faces were sagging and wrinkled. These feeble men and women were tired in both body and spirit, trapped in their fading bodies...

Two

It was a weekend and these hunched, aging mothers and fathers had no visitors. Maybe their children forgot. Maybe they got stuck in

traffic or caught a nasty cold. Or maybe they just didn't want to talk to their elderly parents in a stagnant, putrid-smelling nursing home. Maybe their children were just off living their own lives. Taking care of their own children now. Making boxed cakes. And celebrating *new* birthdays.

One old man was different. He sat with pride in one of those ugly vinyl floral numbers. His posture was as erect as his warped back would allow, and yet an undeniable power emanated from his place in the back of the room. I heard him muttering something about "Kids being so ignorant these days—can't even answer a simple *Jeopardy* question. Imbeciles. It's Uruguay. The answer is Uruguay." Fleming parroted his answer. The old man lifted his smug gaze from the television and stared at me intently, as if appraising my worth from his side of the room. He just sat there watching at me. Challenging me with a look that said, "Bet *you* didn't know that." No, I didn't know that. But I returned his stare anyway.

Three

His name was Everett. His children lived in California. He hated nursing home food. He hated the nursing home residents. He hated everything about being stuck in this "sanitized floral hell." But he had seen worse. He had been a pilot who had fought in the Vietnam War. His answers came in that short, curt manner as though he thought he could scare me off if he acted disagreeable enough. However, his tough outer shell cracked a bit when he said he "flew an MiG-17 jet fighter." I could hear the subtle shift in his voice. Despite years of being beaten down, unappreciated, and scorned, his chest still swelled slightly when mentioning his former exploits. But as quickly as his pride came, it dissipated. And it left behind a bittersweet residue of his fighter days. I watched him carefully tuck away any emotion he had begrudgingly let surface. And he promptly returned to resentfully pelting me with his terse comments. "Young people these days are morons, complete

ninnies, and just downright spoiled.” I tried not to smile at the red agitation that had begun to slowly paint his face—starting with a little red blotch on his left cheek, another on his right temple—both slowly growing until his every facial expression was highlighted in red. “They wear inappropriate clothing.” He glanced at me. And silently assessed my steely grey high school track sweatshirt, Arizona jeans, and Adidas tennis shoes. And bitterly concedes, “I guess you’re ok. *Today*, at least.” He shot me a resentful you-got-lucky-this-time look, and I knew that he would be taking careful note of my clothing choices from now on. “Well, they have no respect for their elders,” he spat. He tilted his head slightly and narrowed his eyes into barely perceptible slits—making sure that I understood what he was insinuating. He had not asked for my company and I was being a typical egotistical teenager to think that he would actually *enjoy* chatting with me. A full minute passed. Realizing I wasn’t going to take the hint to leave he said, “And to top it all off, they complain *all the time*.”

Four

I knocked on room 134, heard a faint grunt, and walked in. Upon catching sight of me, Everett promptly rolled his eyes and turned over in his bed to face the opposite wall. *Nice to see you too*. I feigned a hurt look, dragged my feet as though the added distance around his bed were miles instead of inches, sat down in a chair, and loudly scooted it next to his bed—making sure it squeaked and screeched as much possible. I leaned over until I was ten inches from his face, stretched out my smile into the cheesiest grin possible and said, “Hi.” He briefly turned away again, but not in time to hide his smile. This had become our greeting for the past few weeks. Everett could no longer get out of bed. The vinyl seats of the living area would have been heaven to him now. The pale walls of his room were completely bare; the only signs that a person even lived there was the pile of mail on the dresser and the lone American

flag that lay folded in a crisp triangle on the nightstand. I asked him once why he hadn't decorated his room. He flashed me one of his signature "you idiot teenager" looks and grumbled, "Why? I'm in a nursing home stuck in a bed that feels like it's padded with cardboard. My family never visits me. And the only person whom I ever see is a spoiled... *teenager*." At the last word, his face scrunched into a wrinkled ball that reminded me a bulldog eating a lemon. Smiling at his dramatic and transparently fake aversion to me, I proposed a solution; "Maybe if you had something happy on the walls, you'd like your room more? Your family sent Christmas and New Year's cards, I could hang them up if you'd like." His face changed. Hardened. I could see the "no" before I even heard him say it. "No," he rumbled. "You want to know why nothing is on my walls? It's because people have to *deserve* my recognition, my respect, before *anything* of theirs gets put where I can see it."

Five

He stared out the window. March snow was falling. The day was grey and drear and yet, he stared fixated on something out there that I couldn't see. For minutes on end, he lay in his bed unblinking and unmoving. He didn't want to play cards, watch game shows, or make fun of me. I didn't know how to help him. So, one Tuesday afternoon I folded a paper airplane. I walked in without knocking—he knew by my footsteps who it was. I set it on his lap. Gave a small smile. And turned to leave.

"Kali."

I half-turned to look at him. "Yes?"

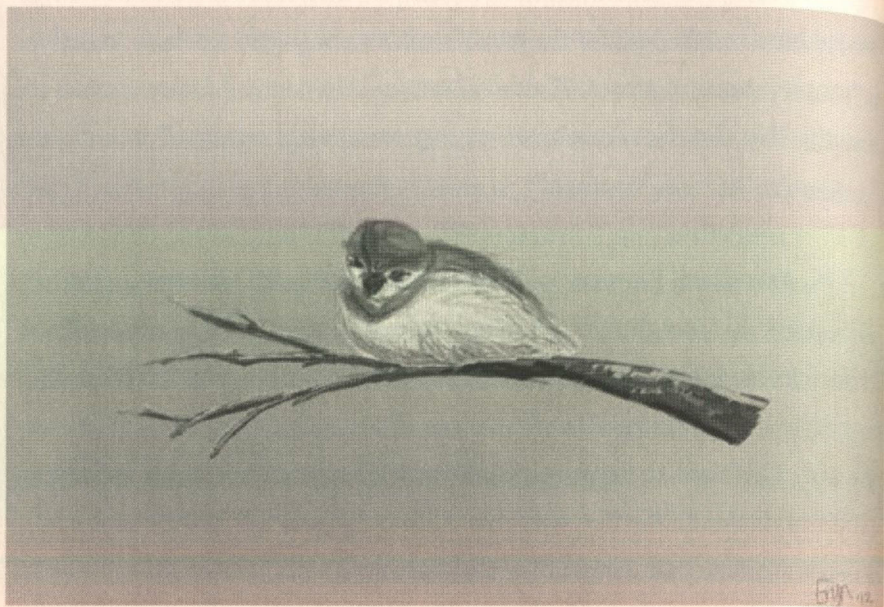
"Thank you."

Everett Richardson had just said thank you. To me. The Imbecile. It was now my turn to stare. Mouth open, eyes wide, I gawked at the old man. His face flushed with the realization that his Mr. Grouch persona

had failed him. In attempt to counter his comment he said, "You folded it wrong. I doubt your airplane would fly even if you taped it to a bird." His words tapered off into a muttering of "Stupid kids, can't do anything right these days..." For the next five minutes he continued to critique my folded handiwork. And for the next five hours he taught me how to make a "proper" paper airplane. "Fold it like this." He'd say. I'd copy him—exactly. "No. No. No. Aren't you paying attention? Like *this*."

Six

I was late. I always visited Everett at the same time everyday. I rushed into his room with an apology on my tongue, but it never got the chance to escape my lips. Instead, it leaked out in slow whistle. I found myself halted in the middle of the room. The sheets had been stripped on the bed. The blankets were folded. Everett's mail was no longer resting on his nightstand. His flag was gone. The only item left in the room was a paper airplane that dangled from his window.



Eryn Schlote, "House Sparrow"

BABY GIRL

by *Abbie Goldschmid*

One

"I really don't like babies." That's what her daddy's best friend used to say. "They are slobbery and gross. Why would you ever want one?"

"Why would anyone want to go through the pain of childbirth for something that cries all of the time?" That's what I used to say. "She will be helpless and needy and you won't have any freedom ever again."

"Don't you think you're rushing it?" That's what her mommy's friends used to say. "Don't you think it would be better to wait until you all are more financially stable? That baby is going to cost a lot."

That was before we met her.

Two

"Ahh Ahh?" She turned her head to look back at me. "Ahh Ahh?" That was the closest she could get to saying A.A. (short for Auntie Abbie). She had to make sure that I was still watching her, protecting her. I nodded to her that I was still there. Her huge grin made her eyes almost disappear. She again started crawling toward the handsome young toddler that had caught her eye. Ten months old and she was already flirting; her dad better keep that shotgun clean. Her bright blue eyes glimmered as she started grabbing for the boy. He would have no part in this—he scurried as fast as his chubby little legs could carry him back to his parents. She was appalled at this rejection and her face clearly demonstrated it. The chase had begun. No one can resist Bri's charms, especially not a boy. She was going to make sure of it.

I watched this blossoming young love with the parents of other young children that couldn't make it through the Christmas Eve service as we waited in the lobby. She would catch up to the little boy, he would

run away, she would crawl after him. The cycle kept going until he finally gave up. She had won. Her persistence won her the man of her dreams. However, once he had finally given in and decided to play with her, she was no longer interested. The hunt was over, the pursuit no longer necessary. Without a challenge, her attention cannot be gained.

Three

"Bri, what is that animal? Can you say zebra?"

"Doggy."

"No, Bri. That's not a doggy. That's a zebra. Try to say zebra."

"Doggy." She points at the herd of striped mammals in the exhibit in front of her.

"Hannah, help your daughter. She thinks everything is a dog."

"There is no help for her. She even thinks people are doggies. You can try, but she isn't going to say it." Hannah wandered away and left me with Brianna. Challenge accepted. I was going to help her identify these animals correctly.

"Bri, what is that?" She looked at me and smiled.

"Eeebrah."

"Yes! That's right. Say it again."

"Eeebrah."

"Yay! I'm so proud of you. Hannah, get over here. She said it! Bri, say it for your mommy."

Hannah picked her up and pointed to the zebras. "Bri, what is that?"

She gave me a sneaky grin. I knew what that grin meant. I thought, "Don't you dare, Brianna Elizabeth. Don't do it."

She replied to her mom, "Doggy."

Four

She wouldn't stop screaming. She hates it when anyone leaves.

"Bri, Mommy is going to be right back; I promise. Just calm down, she just had to run into the store. Shhh! Here, hold this." I handed my niece one of my brand new sparkly heels. She held it in her small hands, mesmerized by the bright colors.

"Preeedy..." She replied in her one year old gibberish. She remained happy and content in her car-seat until my sister returned from her brief shopping trip into Target. I informed my sister that her daughter definitely takes after me; she is calmed by cute shoes and shopping.

Five

She was so small the first time I held her. Less than two hours old, she wasn't cute; really she was just a shriveled little blob. She could barely open her eyes, much less smile. *Why would anyone want to go through the pain of childbirth for something that cries all of the time?*

I put my finger in her palm, and she grabbed on. She opened her bright blue eyes. I knew she couldn't really be thinking about anything, but the way she looked at me... I would not dream of looking away. The tears started rolling down my face. I kissed her forehead and whispered only to her, "Oh, this is why."

PHYLLIS

by Holly Stewart

She forgets every 10 minutes.

Her memory is wiped clean.

And whatever story she remembers that day is the same story you'll hear on repeat. She's like a broken rec- broken record.

She said she won't come visit me. She said she won't call me anymore.

She's done with me. She left me here.

She tears up again; I've watched her cry so many times today. My heart breaks every time she repeats her stories because I know her heart is breaking just as bad as the first time.

Phyllis, it's time for coffee. Do you want coffee?

Coffee. I used to have coffee with her. She said she won't come visit me.

She left me here.

Phyllis, I'm here now. I want to have coffee with you. I love you.

Wide eyes. Toothless smile.

You love me?

I nod numbly. I have promised this woman my love.

Hello dear, what's your name?

My name is Holly.

Oh, do you come here often?

I come every day.

Well, I've never met you!

I know, Phyllis.

Holly, would you like a cookie? Sit down and have some coffee with me.

I have to go, Phyllis, but I'll be back tomorrow, okay?

Who are you?

DANCE FLOOR CONFESSIONS

by Kyle Rubel

Confession: I've only known you a week, but I can't help thinking we could have more. When I think about you cuddled next to me, a smile forces its way to my face. Maybe this one time things will be different. It's always been my rule to never fall for anyone on a trip, but where's the fun in life if you don't test rules? North Dakota isn't that far anyway, is it? The thing is I'm not very good at this. Of course I know how I feel, but how exactly do I tell you that I like you for the first time? I've decided tonight is the night. I'm going to let those words leave my mouth and enter your ears. Tonight is the last night we will be together, for a while, so why not tonight? The final dance is the perfect time for me to whisper those words.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror. A white dress shirt, black tie, black suspenders, and bright red pants stare back at me. My hair sits in a perfect wave on my head. My hands touch the wave, making sure not a single piece is out of place. Tonight is the night I want to look my best. For you. I struggle to keep my stomach in place as it slowly creeps toward my hips. The clock tells me I have to wait two hours to see you. My legs pace back and forth in my hotel room as I pass the time. Before I know it, it is time to head to the dance. "I. I. I like. I like you." I rehearse this over and over, yet all that manages to come out is the stutter of a buffoon.

The dance floor is crowded. All of the people blend together. You are nowhere to be seen. In an attempt to calm myself, I walk off the dance floor. Outside the building for some air. *Breathe in. Breathe out.* A thick pile of steam leaves my mouth as I encourage myself. My hands flutter as I think about what I am going to do. *Just walk inside. Be yourself, and everything will work out.* I follow my advice and walk back

into the warmth.

As I get inside, a bright red plaid shirt approaches me. It's you. The one person I wanted to see all night. This is the moment I have been waiting for all night. My mouth creeps open, and sounds force their way out. "Eh. Ah. Ooh." You tilt your head, confused by the babble I recited for you. "I'll meet you on the floor," I manage to get out before prancing away. I rush into the bathroom and find the first stall. My knees introduce themselves to the tiles below, and my arms embrace the pearly white bowl in front of me. Gags exit my throat, but nothing else does. *How is dry heaving going to help me?* I collect every piece of me that has spread itself across the bathroom floor. Once I give myself a few seconds, I walk out the door. You are nowhere to be found, so I walk toward the dance floor.

I'm greeted by the sight of future regrets from the people around and blinding neon lights. The crowd surrounding pushes me toward the center of the dance floor. Sin coats this dance floor, and I'm hoping that I won't be part of it. My eyes search disappointedly as I realize you are nowhere to be found. I'm about to lose hope as my piercing blues catch a glimpse of a red plaid shirt in the distance. Your shirt.

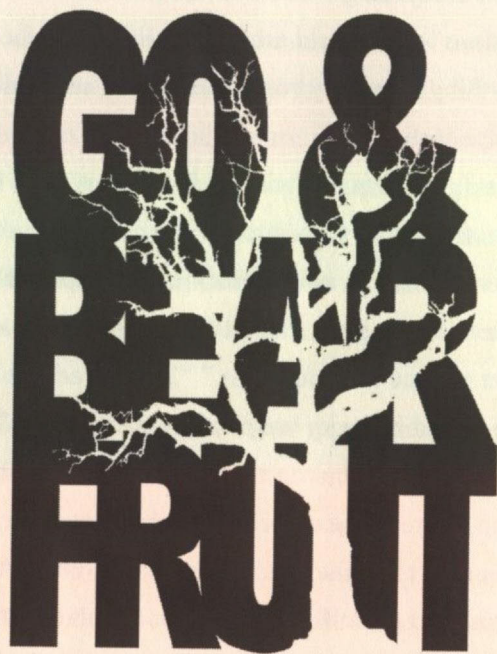
Step one. A smile finds its way to my face. The same smile I get when I think of you cuddled next to me. My next step is more difficult than the previous. It's now or never. If I don't recite those words for you, I will become part of the future regrets that surround me. All the words of encouragement from songs I love find their way to me. I want to "shake it like a ladder to the sun" whatever that means. If there was ever a prime to my happiness, this would be the moment. You are ten feet away from me. Ten feet. That's a mere few steps for my track star legs.

As I get closer, I am hit with a hard realization as the glass shatters. The guy next to you slowly moves closer. His hips press against yours like they fit perfectly together. Your hands link around his waist

the way they did to mine when we had our first dance. He leans closer to you; your welcoming eyes invite him to go further. You lean even closer to him and your lips lock. My eyes refuse to leave the two of you. The crowd continues to push me toward you, but my feet fight to uproot themselves from the ground below me. You two continue to kiss each other, oblivious to the world around. Oblivious to the fact that I am witnessing everything. I pull my rooted feet loose and walk off the dance floor and head into seclusion.

I find a safe spot once outside and allow my eyes to drown myself in my emotions. The tears stream down my face, causing a little comfort. People outside swarm me in an attempt to cheer me up. I'm greeted with "You are such a beautiful guy." "You are hilarious. You shouldn't let anyone get you down." "You are adorable, kind, and sincere. Anyone would be lucky to spend a day with you." Their words leave my head faster than they can enter. I broke the number one rule I made for taking a trip, and it came back to bite me from behind. The three words I planned to speak to you fade into an echo. An echo of naiveté that I promised myself I would never become part of.

I leave the building, head low, all confidence flown away to a foreign land. I think of how I prepared for the night. It all disintegrates into a punch line that I created for myself. I laugh at the thought that maybe this time things will be different. Things had never been different in the past, so why would things be different now. The words "just once" skip back and forth in my head. I think "I wish I could feel it all for you. I wish I could be it all for you." Just once I wanted things to be different than they were in the past. Maybe someday I will get my just once, but today isn't the day. Today isn't the day I get to recite my dance floor confession.



Rebecca Ortner, "Bear Fruit"

CRUSH

by Abbie Goldschmid

“Hey Eric, got any pop?”

His voice is deep and mysterious. I have only heard it a few times in the months I have been watching him, and this is the closest it has ever sounded. *Don't turn around. Do not make eye-contact. Whatever you do, do not talk to him. You are just going to mess this up. It would be better if you never meet him, then all your expectations will not be disappointed.* I sit on the old, beat up couch in the corner room of first floor West Hall, the man of my dreams just walked through the door, and I don't even want to look at him—I can't. I'm too scared.

Maybe I should take you back a few months, back to early September...

It was Steak Night. It was not the first time I had seen him around campus, but it was definitely the first time I noticed him. He was walking with a group of West guys into the RSC wearing a dark jacket and his hair was just starting to cover his deep brown eyes. He was laughing. That was the first thing I noticed, his laugh. I was walking with my roommate from the parking lot in front of the RSC into the Cafe. I couldn't stop staring. You know that moment when you zone out on one thing and don't even realize you are looking at it? Well, that was me: staring dumbly at the best looking guy I had ever seen. However, my ignorance to the direction of my gaze was short-lived. I caught myself from the trip just before my eyes would have become fixated on the pavement.

“Abbie. Abbie!” Kaleigh was snapping her fingers next to my ear.

I blushed in response, “What? Oh, sorry, Kaleigh. I'm back.”

“What were you looking at?” She was grinning. She knew

exactly what I was looking at; she just wanted to see me turn a darker shade of crimson. I obliged.

“Oh, you know, just enjoying the evening atmosphere.”

Her smile widened, “You should find out his name.”

I had no response. She was right, I should find out his name. I wasn’t going to be able to get him out of my head anyway. Something clicked inside me when I saw him that night. I won’t go as far as to say “love at first sight,” but I knew I had to meet him. I started imagining our future together as if I was thirteen again. I know what you’re thinking, and the answer is “yes.” I did draw little hearts in the margins of my notebooks. I was smitten by the guy; a nameless, yet wonderful, man that I knew I had to get to know. In my head, we were the perfect couple. In reality, he didn’t know I existed.

I kept seeing him everywhere, yet I couldn’t bring myself to talk to him. The closest I came was talking to a friend standing next to him on the Green, but I could not even force myself to look him in the eye. I realized that these interactions were ridiculous after I was giving advice to a wing-mate. In typical fortune-cookie fashion I said, “Fear is never a good enough reason not to do something.”

Ooo, ouch. I hate taking my own advice, but I couldn’t just knock on his door and say, “Oh, hey. My name is Abbie, and I have been watching you for weeks. I think I like you. What’s your name?” That was a surefire way to get “desperate” forever tattooed on my forehead as far as Northwestern is concerned. I just could not sit by and watch anymore; I had to find out his name. Time to utilize our local creeper website: I headed to the campus directory. I typed in “West Hall.” He was the first one on the list. How convenient that his last name starts with an “a.” Brett Lee Amiotte. Junior. Alright, I have taken the first step. Now it is time to make contact. I logged on to Facebook, searched his name, clicked his profile, and glossed my mouse over the “send friend request”

button. Nope, I won't do it. I quickly shut my laptop. *It's not worth it; nothing will ever come of it. I would just be disappointed. He's probably a jerk anyway. He would never like me.*

The justifications for my inactivity continued for a few minutes. The only thought that kept creeping its way into my mind was simple: *nothing will happen if you do nothing.* I slowly opened my screen once again and ran my finger over the fingerprint password reader. It took a few tries; my hands were too sweaty from all the nerves for it to read. His profile was still open. *Brett Amiotte, why can't I just get over you? I don't even know you.* I went back to my own profile, double checked that my picture was at least semi-attractive, returned to his page, clicked the button, and slammed my screen with even more strength and passion than before. My poor laptop will never be the same after this crush. I tried to steady my breathing; I was completely freaking out. I considered taking back the request. I even considered deleting my profile. I was desperate to avoid embarrassment; it was probably a vain pursuit.

No, calm down, Abbie. Everything is going to be fine. My thoughts attempted to bring my heart rate down to a normal, human pace. The thoughts weren't doing much to help. It was all him at this point. The worst that he could do was ignore my request. *He wouldn't do that, would he? I mean, we have like fifty mutual friends, and no one ignores a friend request if you have fifty mutual friends.* At least, I hoped not.

The hours seemed like days. I kept logging on every few minutes in the hopes that there would be a notification waiting for me. I kept refreshing the page anticipating that little red number to pop up. I was continuously left in disappointment. All it took was for him to click "confirm," that's it. It wasn't that hard. Why was it taking him so long? After all, he had smiled at me a few times; at least I thought he did. *Come on, computer.* That little "1" finally arrived at the top left corner of my screen. *Yes!* Oh, wait, this is awkward. My sister "poked" me. That

was the notification. Not the one I was looking for, praying for. *Okay, it's okay. He probably just hasn't gone online yet.*

I had to wait another day before I was finally able to stalk him properly. That part of the story is pretty embarrassing (not that the rest isn't) so I won't go into great detail. Let's just say I knew all the answers to the basic first date questions before he even got the chance to ask me on that date.

For the next few weeks, our interaction was minimal. Fine, okay, it was nonexistent. I was terrified. He was older and smart and popular and ridiculously good looking and well, you get the idea. I was intimidated. In chapel one day, we walked about twenty feet next to each other up the aisle, and I couldn't even say "hi."

In my attempt to learn more about this man who had stolen my heart without even talking to me, I discovered that we had a mutual friend. We have finally returned to the "Eric" from the beginning of the story. Eric got it in his head (after a little encouragement from me) that neither Brett nor I was going to make a move, and it was up to him and our friend, Katie, to throw us together. Here we are, back in that corner dorm room. I am engulfed by the smell of old socks, the piles of CD's, and the occasional textbook plopped on the floor. It's obvious that the socks are used more often than those books. I'm playing video games, sitting on that rough, old couch. Katie and Eric are working on Spanish at the desk behind me. Brett's room is right next door. It is customary that once a hanger is on the door handle, any West guy who walks by must enter and ask if there is any pop. This is, of course, a cleverly thought-out mechanism to see what girls happen to be in that room.

I hear the voice behind me. That voice that still gives me chills today. He introduces himself to Katie.

I am pleading with myself not to turn around. *Focus on the game, Abbie. You don't need to look to know it's him. Looking is only*

going to make him come over here, and then you are going to have to talk to him. You cannot talk to him. All of my begging and attempts at self-control are useless. I just can't help myself. I sneak a peek over my shoulder. There he is; I just take in his whole presence. How can anyone not fall in love with him? I certainly couldn't stop myself.

"Hi, I'm Brett. Mind if I join you?"

"Sure. I'm Abbie," I reply. I attempt to make my voice sound as even and nonchalant as possible, but all of my acting experience cannot disguise the utter terror in my voice. I can't force my gaze to meet his. My hands start shaking, my pulse is rushing. I just want to scream, or run away—or kiss him. I'm not really sure.

He extends his hand toward me, and I return the action in the hope that it will lead to a firm handshake. I want to make a good first impression; one strong up and down as is customary, that was the plan. *Uh oh*, something just went horribly wrong. His hand just went limp, and he begins to chuckle in that awkward fashion that only communicates one thing. He was thinking to himself, "What is wrong with this girl?" *No, it can't be. I just screwed up everything. What just happened? I have said a total of three words. Only I can manage to destroy any chance I ever had with three words. Now I really can't look him in the eyes. Ever.* I drop my hand. I start racking my brain for what I could have possibly done to warrant such an obvious confusion in his face. While I get lost in my thoughts, he, though slightly fazed, continues reaching past me, grabs a controller to my left, and plops down next to me.

Oh. My. Gosh.

He was not trying to shake my hand. The epiphany came like a slap in the face. Well, it's official: I am the most socially inept person in the world. He was going for a controller, not my hand. I try to laugh it off, "Oh, sorry. That was awkward. I didn't realize...I thought you were....so I...never mind. My bad." I hear stifled giggles from my

matchmakers behind me. I'm off to a really bad start. *At least he's laughing; it could be worse.*

I spent the rest of the night trying to redeem myself. I must have done a pretty good job, because two days later, I got a date. Four days later, I got a boyfriend. I now have a ring on my finger, and I still get to hear that awkward laugh in response to the stupid things I say and do. I still blush when he looks at me and get butterflies when he smiles. I still have a huge crush on him. I guess not much has changed—and the only thing that ever will is my last name.

CONCRETE COCOONS

by *Theresa Larrabee*

Sometimes life happens in a way that makes it seem like no time has passed, but when you look at yesterday, you realize that it wasn't yesterday at all, but last week. Or last month. Or last year. Then you have to just sit there and wonder where all the other yesterdays went, and how much of you went with them. Wandering through the halls of my high school, I couldn't help but wonder. The walls, the lockers, the doors, they're all the same; I can't count the amount of times I wandered down these very halls, absentmindedly running my hand over the smooth blue doors, feeling the hinges and locks slip by. So why do the very halls that I seemed to live in suddenly feel like a stranger's home? When butterflies leave their cocoons, is it because it doesn't feel like their home anymore?

The school walls used to be my cocoon. I wrapped myself in them, and they held me for a while, but now the halls are empty; all the butterflies have left. In my mind, though, the empty halls are filled with my classmates, everyone walking to their lockers, joking with their friends, and pretending that they are anywhere but at school. People run down the halls, pushing overly affectionate couples apart, jumping on their friends, or simply trying to get from point A to point B without bumping into people. I never realized how violent the halls were between classes, but every day it was the same. People would burst out of their classes at the sound of the bell, locker doors slam open, people shove their books and each other into their lockers, yell at their friends, and then race back to class all in three minutes. It seems like an infinite and miniscule amount of time all at once.

Between classes there would always be a crowd around my locker, my friends hung out there until the last possible second; squeezing all the enjoyment they could out of those precious minutes

before dashing off to class. I would wait until everyone left, as did Clara, my best friend and locker partner, then we would wander down the hall as far as we could together before breaking off to go to our respective classes. I always felt bad for the people in the lockers around us because they had to put up with our impenetrable crowd for two years. I wonder if they were always late to class or if they were standing there the whole time silently cursing us. I never bothered to ask.

Even though I used the same locker for two years, I still can't remember the combination. I never could. As soon as the year began, Clara and I would jam a pencil in the latch inside the door and snap it off to stop it from locking. Sometimes it would come unjammed though and I would have to wait for Clara to get to the locker and unlock it. If I lean in close to the door I could probably still see the faint marks from the time I decided to write the combination on the outside of the locker. Not that it helped much because I am hopeless when it comes to opening locks. One time the door came unjammed when Clara was sick, and, even with the combination written on the door, I couldn't get it open. I had to go to the office to ask for help and the vice-principal came out with his key ring to unlock it for me. Apparently, I had the only locker in the whole school that the key didn't work for.

But this locker is no longer mine. The desk down the hall in the English room is no longer mine. The spot at the lunch table is no longer mine. I have so many ties to this place, but in return it has no ties to me. The school has moved on and found new people to fill our places. It misses us not, nor does it need us. So many of my memories are in these halls, but they hold nothing for me. How is it that something can leave such a big mark on me, but in return I had no effect on it at all? I wish I could forget about the school like it forgot about me. My time here was not necessarily filled with happiness or learning. I was the locker the key didn't work on. It wasn't necessarily that I didn't fit in, I

had friends; it was just that I was not made like the other lockers. Some people seemed to enjoy high school; they look back on it as "some of the best years of their lives." I mostly just look back on it as time wasted. Time wasted in a place that had nothing to offer me. Three years I sat in the same classrooms listening to the same teachers talk, coasting through life. I took AP courses, college courses, but I was bored. The only time I seemed to be remotely stimulated was after school.

The memories of my after school activities are precious to me in a way that I don't quite understand, like butterflies I can cup in my hand. I hold them carefully, making sure not to brush them with my fingers or break them. I release them and they glow like fireflies in the night. I can see them floating in the hallway, such small glimmers in a sea of moonlight.

Looking back, even theatre wasn't all that great though. The acting was shaky at best, and the sets were about as realistic as the special effects in an old horror movie. It is physically painful to watch recordings of those shows. I think it was more the process than the product that makes those productions worthwhile in my memory. I got to spend a lot of time with my friends, and I learned a lot about discipline and perseverance from those plays. Clara, our friend Allen, and I were all in speech and the plays. Most nights we would have to run from one rehearsal to the other in order to be on time. We would charge down the dimly lit halls, pushing the three sets of double doors open as hard as we could, never once slowing our pace because tardiness is not tolerated in theatre. One night I remember getting done with a group speech practice late and challenging Allen and Clara to a race down the hall. We took off at breakneck pace, hooting and taunting each other as we went. Blue moonlight was shining through the windows, reflecting off the walls and floors, transforming the drab white corridor into a mystical tunnel. It seemed like we could fly. When we neared the doors, I slowed down.

Clara and Allen didn't though, and instead both made a running leap at them, smacking face first into the two very locked doors. I slowly pushed my doors open, the only ones that weren't locked, and continued on to the auditorium, trying not to die of laughter. We never raced to rehearsal again, and Clara is forever convinced that I have superpowers and that I am psychic.

I'm pretty sure that I am not psychic though, and if I could have superpowers, being psychic is not what I would choose. I think that I would want to fly. Flying would be the exact opposite of high school. That place was full of locked doors and closed minds, but when you fly all the doors fade away and nothing can keep you from where you want to go.

I never realized how trapped I felt in high school until I left it. When I think back, I can see all my memories, all the things I did, and I have to wonder: how could that have made me happy? Is that even me? High school wasn't that long ago, yet I don't know the person I was when I was there. When I look into the faces in my memories, I don't see myself, I see a naive childish girl who thought she was ready for the world, who knew her childhood was long since over, but didn't realize how far she had to go before she was an adult. I truly cherish the happy memories. They are the only worthwhile thing I got from high school, and in these blue-moonlight filled halls those small lights are present, dancing through the halls and classrooms, showing me that, while most things are dark, there is a little light left here. Tiny beacons of happiness in a place where monotony and discontent resided.

I didn't realize how much I have changed in the past few years until I went back for my little brother's musical performance. In him I see so much of me: he has all the awkwardness, the intelligence, the longing to fit in and have friends that I possessed, and still possess. I wanted to tell him not to put too much stock in the here and now, because

in a little while it won't matter. I wanted to tell him that, while these coming years will have a huge impact on him, it ultimately won't be the place where he finds who he is. I wanted to tell him that once he leaves, none of it will ever be of any real importance to him again. I can't tell him these things though. He has to figure it out on his own and in doing so he will be stronger and more prepared for what awaits beyond the walls of high school. High school isn't home. Home is the place you find after you leave.

In the time since I graduated, I haven't found my home. I am still in search of where I belong, but I have become myself more truly than ever before. The person I was no longer exists, and that's okay because she wasn't really real to begin with. My superpower wasn't being psychic, it was being adaptive. I would be whoever people wanted me to be because it made them happy and I convinced myself that if they were happy, I would be happy. Life doesn't work that way though. Yesterday I was a chameleon, a wallflower, but when I woke up today, I was me. Somehow overnight I burst out of my cocoon of concrete walls and could fly. I don't know where I'll go, but it doesn't really matter. I will go where I need to be because that's what butterflies do.

OLD FRIEND

by Kristen Burd

Gently closing the door, I tip-toe across your hearth, watching out for sharp rocks. You're here. I can feel your touch as it rustles through the budded trees. The damp coolness clings to my bare arms. Blades of grass are like drops of water rolling off my naked feet. I peer up at your vast, black face. Only fourteen fading stars—are you somber tonight? You are infinite and intimate. I offer up my secrets, knowing they'll be forever yours. My eternal confidant. Comfort is what I seek: peace is what you give. Your embrace smells of rain and damp earth, leaving me refreshed. Thank you, my old friend, for knowing just what I need.



Eryn Schlote, "White Throated Sparrow"

Poetry

Judge's Note

Sarah Shapiro's wonderful meditation "New Seas" reveals the paradoxical power of water: how it heals, blesses, baptizes...and threatens, drowns, and floods. I think of Auden's definition of poetry: "the clear expression of mixed feelings." The exploration of the paradox enables a robust art that, as the saying goes, can comfort the afflicted—and afflict the comfortable.

Mixed feelings are at the heart of the coming-of-age moment, the shift from innocence to experience, and that moment unfolds richly throughout Jacob Christiansen's "Day of Recess." The narrator recounts a childhood of being "the gods of the woodchip kingdom" with nicknames like "Flash" and "Beef Stew." He wakes up one day when a friend is branded a "faggot" and a young girl is branded a "whore" and it's clear that "We've all forgotten the days of recess."

Ryan Davis' talent for the surreal is on display in "The Real Tim," a poem in which voice works in concert with narrative to entangle us in the strangeness of our world. Sarah Kugler's aptly titled "What I'm Thinking as I Walk to the Hospital at 7 o'clock in the Morning" takes us into the weary but lucid mind of a speaker who's "thinking about anything but walking through those ER doors/and telling someone why [she's] here." And Hannah Barker's lovely "Stuck Between Two Places" features not just "yellow, windy Iowa" but also "the desert in [her] skin" and the moment where we become simultaneously residents and aliens—to the earth, to our home places and the places we love, and ultimately to ourselves.

NEW SEAS

by Sarah Shapiro

Little eddies swirl around my ankles,
Microcosmic hurricanes.
Here, near water, I can breathe freely;
As a child, I always felt at home.
I was a new species of mermaid,
a nymph in a faded blue one-piece.

My father was eleven when he nearly drowned,
His own storm system swirling around him;
an unkind baptism.
But it was only a baptism, for he lived;
He still has never learned to swim.

People on TV are floating down the street in a boat,
Their expressions drifting, between devastations.
The police officers are scanning the area
for bedraggled remnants of families,
refugees on their own rooftops.
No one has dared to point out
the irony of Canal Street.
Turning on my kitchen faucet echoes the ocean like a conch
and I sleep with rain boots near my bed.

Pour new seas in mine eyes, says Donne –
He begs for a flood,
giving no thought to collateral damage.
All your waves and breakers have crashed over me,
says the psalmist. But maybe you are afraid
even to pray for spring rains,
knowing you might instead receive

a torrential squall.

On a clear blue day, my father and I
both learn to kayak. Our rhythmic strokes create
currents, whirlpools, tributaries. And I think,
It is not presumptuous to anticipate renewal,
like watching the tide come crashing in,
like waking up when the storm has passed.

shell,

DAY OF RECESS

by Jacob Christiansen

I remember the days of recess
When we were gods of the woodchip kingdom
And no one knew
What failure looked like
Or what was so wrong with the human body
Because we all still watched those cheesy TV shows
And believed what they told us about being “unique”
And we all had really cool nicknames
Like Flash and The Big Cheese and Beef Stew
And we had secret handshakes
And forts that said “No Girls Allowed”
And we didn’t know that Johnny was gay
And we wouldn’t have cared either way
Because we all just wanted friends
I remember nights spent in Tony’s treehouse
Where we’d hold fireflies hostage
And wonder why their butts glowed
And why our dads were so cool
And why Sally always wore such pretty dresses
And why we put up that stupid no girls sign in the first place
What happened between 8 to 3 and 9 to 5
Between sandboxes and suit ties
Somewhere between playdates and mandates
We grew up and spoke rationally
About our godlessness
And felt what failure was
We stopped watching those cheesy TV shows
And we learned that unique meant different
and different meant bad
And we learned what “Faggot” was

And that I could make Johnny cry
Because he wasn't any good at football
And neither was I but at least I didn't wanna kiss boys like Johnny
And at least I wasn't going to hell like Johnny
And at least I didn't have a bruise from
my daddy's backhand like Johnny
And Johnny didn't have friends anymore
Somewhere Tony took down the "No Girls Allowed" sign
And stopped inviting us to his treehouse
And started using it for sleepovers that involved condoms
And figuring out that love meant sex
And that if love meant sex then his dad loved a lot of women
And maybe that's why his mom left
And maybe that's what it means to be a man
Somewhere Sally discovered that wearing a pretty dress
didn't matter if she didn't have boobs
And that mirrors were for more than just making funny faces
And that they were really for telling her how fat she was
And how ugly she was
And how worthless she was
And how if she got on her knees in Tony's treehouse
she forgot about that mirror for awhile
And we all started using the word "whore"
Somewhere Johnny learned that his mom's pain pills
could make him numb
And that if he was numb he didn't cry
And he didn't feel his dad's backhand
And he didn't feel his loneliness
And somewhere Johnny learned that being numb
couldn't make him straight
And he didn't leave a note
Somewhere Tony learned if he was drunk
the sex wouldn't feel so dirty
And that if it wasn't dirty it wasn't wrong
And he wouldn't feel guilty
And he wouldn't be ashamed

And somewhere Tony learned that when you
hit her, the guilt comes back
And he didn't leave a note
Somewhere Sally learned that if she didn't eat she wouldn't
And if she wasn't fat she wouldn't need him
And she'd be pretty
And she'd meet the right guy
And somewhere Sally learned that when you're pregnant,
you keep getting larger
And she didn't leave a note.
And damn it,
We've all forgotten the days of recess
I don't think I'll leave a note either.

be fat

THE REAL TIM

by Ryan Davis

"In ten seconds you'll be gone."

I looked up, from my knitting.

A large ball of flame hovered just outside the window.

I closed my eyes and lifted myself off of the table.

They all screamed.

Everyone ran from the room.

I hovered above the floor flexing my

knitting beneath me like a jellyfish.

I smiled a little.

The others didn't understand.

I am not a monster.

I am only slightly taller and slightly thinner than the Real Tim.

The Real Tim stood up from his desk 5 states away.

He could feel someone drawing power from him.

He walked out into the hall and got a drink of water,

Then he walked back into the room and sat down.

The world.

Is smaller now.

The Real Tim is running out.

Quick get a drink of water before the flames engulf you.

WHAT I'M THINKING AS I WALK
INTO THE HOSPITAL AT 7 O'CLOCK IN
THE MORNING

by Sarah Kugler

I'm thinking of the crunch of leaves beneath my feet.
It's fall,
and it's cold outside.
The grass is glazed in diamonds,
shattering as I step on them.
I'm thinking I should have worn a warmer coat.

I'm thinking about the fog:
how it swaddles distant structures –
homes, churches, traffic lights –
and how they crawl out of its gauzy embrace to greet me.

I'm thinking about the brightness of headlights passing,
these drivers and passengers,
individuals in-transit, racing through the gridded city streets,
fucking with cell phones and CD players,
one eye on the road and the other on Twitter,
cursing like lapsed Catholics
when fumbling fingers spill coffee down starched shirts.

I'm thinking about the rhythm of a normal morning –
People waking up and shrugging off the sleeves of sleep,
pulling on work clothes, pouring coffee,
sending e-mails, searching for keys,
and then getting into cars to drive to businesses to turn on "OPEN"
signs to start the day.

I'm thinking about the man I love
and how the last thing he said to me was
"I can't do this anymore."

I'm clenching my hand into a fist,
trying to remind my fingers
of the feeling of my hand in his.

I'm thinking about how to become invisible.

Small towns are bad for keeping secrets,
and I know I look like hell.

My face is swollen from sobbing but feels tight around the edges –
like an animal carcass

that's sat outside for days beneath the pulsing summer sun

and has become bloated,

legs jutting at right angles,

taut, surreal in its enigma,

a balloon about to pop.

I'm thinking about my heartbeat.

It's warm and immediate

like the rush of crimson blood to your cheeks when you blush.

It tingles, like a snowflake, like a memory,

like a paper cut.

I'm thinking about anything but walking through those ER doors
and telling someone why I'm there.

After all, there's no simple way to spin suicide fantasies to a
stranger.

Four hours later, Cedric the paramedic checks my pulse before
they discharge me.

Not meeting my eyes, he says

that, besides people suffering intense physical trauma,

my heart rate when I checked in

was the fastest he'd ever seen –

Barreling along on the edge of breaking.

Trying to beat its way out of my chest.

STUCK BETWEEN TWO PLACES

by Hannah Barker

These days I find myself surrounded by people stuck between two places.

These days we are here, these days we hang our coats and put on our scarves
in yellow, windy Iowa.

But the boy across the street [with Christ-love in his heart] has come to us with tales of spice-filled India, the land of many gods, of teaching wild packs of young boys who find their pleasure in fighting and incessantly teasing their teacher,

of sitting in leper colonies, sharing stories, sharing laughter, sharing bread,

waving goodbye, and not turning back,
of his teammates running into their house yelling, "ELEPHANT!"
of being able to run outside, turn the corner, and see that elephant.
In the middle of the street.

of watching people gathered around the elephant, handing coins to the outstretched trunk,

a sacrifice for their god,
of going to the slums and entering the home of two fragile parents and a young boy,

of two pictures hanging side by side on their wall,

Jesus here,

Ganesh, the elephant god, here,
of sharing stories of grace with this family, telling them of the one, true God,

of hearing the mother say she will take down Ganesh,
of waving goodbye, and not turning back.

In the midst of tale-telling, the boy [with Christ-love in his heart] stops, turns to me, and asks a question:

"How do you build a home you know you're not going to finish?"

But not everyone is stuck between here and a place so far away.
I know a brother-sister pair who long for nothing more
than the crash-splash of the waves of Lake Superior.

This place is a little closer to our here, our yellow, windy Iowa,
but the ache in their voices makes this neighboring state
seem oceans away.

Their hearts speak of a land overrun with woods of birch, poplar,
pine,

where adventure waits five steps to the right of their front door.
And so does a handful of freshly picked berries.

Raspberries over here.

Blueberries down the end of that trail.

There is a danger in this place.

Be on the look out for wolves. They like to howl on clear nights.

This is the end of the trail.

Yep. A person could get stuck out here.

Nowhere to go from here.

Nowhere to grow.

The brother once told me,

"I don't want to be stuck doing one thing, even if it's a good
thing."

But today, we are here. Today we are in yellow, windy Iowa.
And there is not much water to be spoken of in the middle of
cornfields.

But this brother-sister pair carries a piece of the lake with them.

Its spray can be felt in the sister's sighs,

and its storm clouds can be seen in the blue of the brother's eyes.

I, on the other hand, have found that I have a desert in my skin.

Today I am stuck between snow, wind, and sand.

And the other land is about as far away from yellow, windy Iowa
as you can get:

white, hot Oman.

This is a land of rock and date palms.

This is a land that smells of frankincense and sandalwood.

This is a land of open-hearted hospitality,

and the warmest handshakes I have ever received.
This is a land of Islam.
This is a land where the future is left up to God,
and we can only hope for the best, insha'allah.
The people have a desert calmness about them.
They are weathered by the sand and heat.

But this land feels colorless to me.
This land is not home.
In that land, the desert is not in my skin –
the cornfields are.
In that land I find that my soul is too dry.
In that land some days I find my hands full of a love of faith,
and I drink deeply.
But other days, my love of my God drips through my fingers faster
than I can save it.

But today, today in yellow, windy Iowa, I have a desert in my skin.
Today I miss the faith of those people,
their love that overflowed to fill my empty hands.
Today my ears long to hear the call that drove me to pray to my
God.

By Weather

by Hana Spangler

You sent it by the Weather-Clock
Middle winter's song

February ate it
Entirely too long

It caught for years a cocklebur
Under March's wing

Maiden April used it
To shanghai bits of string

But June postponed the longest shift
Smuggling it for hers

Hiding nigh a decade
Inside some sable furs

She gave it to me postman-marked
Left me with July

Fantasy my torture
You didn't sign it—why?

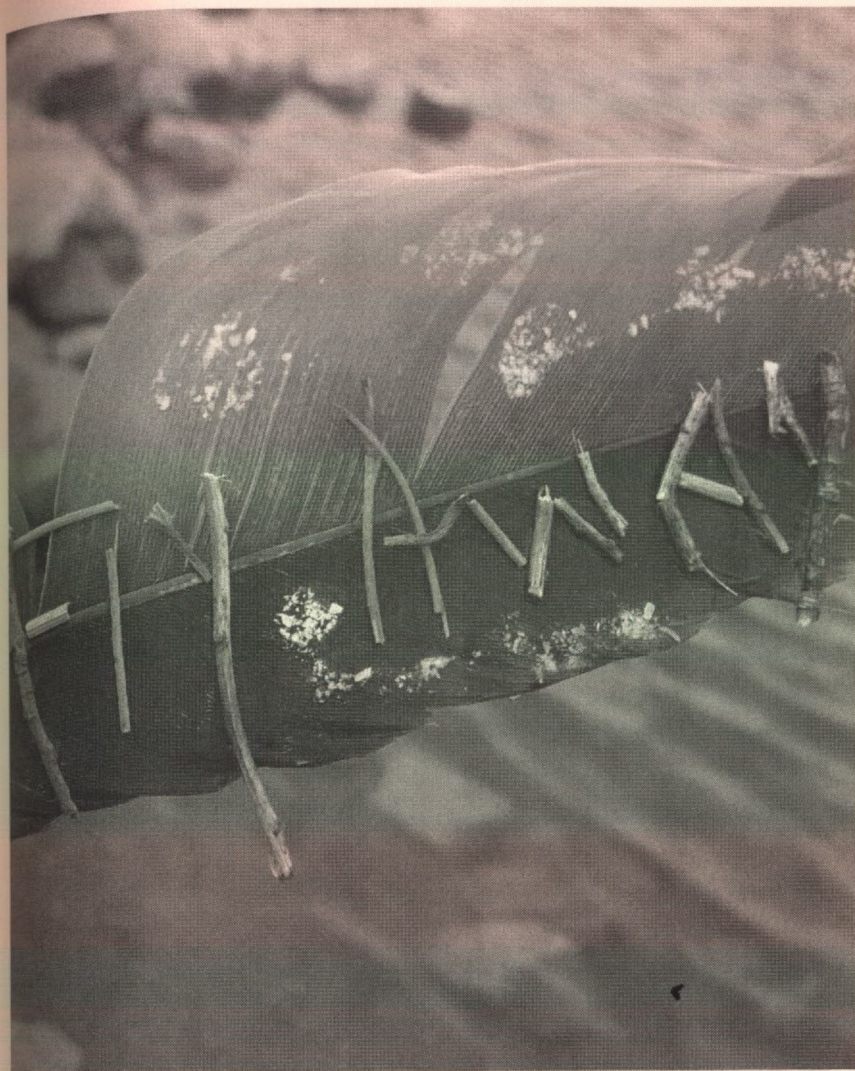
CLOSER

by Hannah Barker

Outside our door is a bush
of pink flowers.

Flowers trying hard to be spirals,
to twist themselves into being,
to spin their lightness into the air.
Their petals open to thin fingers reaching,
their only dark pink wish to
taste the sky.

And as their fingers only go so far,
they send their lilac-pink fragrance floating,
hoping that, if nothing else,
it will at least get them
closer.



Theresa Larrabee, "Fly Away Home"

COLLEGE GIRLS

by Ryan Davis

Jill walked down the hall.
On the other side of the hall
a tall drink of water stood.
It eyed her as she approached.

Jill bent over and picked up
a large bag of money off the ground.
She reaching into her shirt and got out her phone.
Jill tweeted that she had just found
a large stash of cash in the hall.

Jim was a tall drink of water.
He was over some feet tall.
He liked to stand at one end of the hall and
watch girls come towards him.

One day he realized that girls would come down the hall
more frequently if he put a bag of money on the ground.
Soon he began to put a bag of money on the ground
every time he stood at the end of the hall.

Jill walked back down the hall.
She did not notice Jim at all.

Jim stepped forward and
placed another bag on the ground.
This bag was full of dead squirrels.

Phyllis was a tall drink of water.
She walked down the hall and
picked up the bag of dead squirrels and
looked right at Jim and said, "Thank You."

Phyllis was a Biology major.
Jim liked Phyllis.
Phyllis liked Jim.
Jim was a Psychology major.

DÉJÀ VU

by Jocelyn Van Dyke

I've got this
awkward
feeling that

I

can't quite explain.
I must have been here
before because I

think

I've seen those stained glass
windows, or maybe it was that
road sign full of buckshot.

I've

been here once before, seen that
old man carving figurines on the
weathered bench. Or maybe I

thought

it, dreamt it, made it up in my
head. I could've imagined the way
his grey eyes searched mine. Is

this

a flashback to an old adventure?
I'm on the brink of re-
cognition, and I search

thought

and memory until
I'm even more
confused than I was

before.

DANCE WITH ME, DARLING?

by Jacob Christiansen

Dance with me, darling?

Proudly strut

Across the embarrassed,

Halved masses

Girls here,

Boys there,

Nervous tension

Finally Shattered

By one brave boy

Seeking romance in the awkward embrace

Of a seventh-grade soccer player

And his first kiss the shadowed corners

Of a smelly middle-school gym

Sway with me, darling?

Slowly glide

Through the bump and grind crowds

Of Careless youth

And first freedoms

Of "love" played out

Between bedsheets

And sweaty meetings in the barroom bathroom

Of individual expression

And unique thought

Allowed out of their cages

Only under the close watch

Of attentive chaperones

Twist with me, darling?

Quickly tango

And outstep the static slow-dance

Of mismatched pairs

Stuck swaying
Stuck together
Just... stuck
Tender futures lost
In the clinging grasp of young love's great facade,
Choking Passion plays
Static into their ears

Dip with me, darling?
Boldly fall back
And trust that I'll catch you
Find peace in us
And hold tight to our history
As other long embraced partners
Separate
And 'find themselves'
In the lonely dance
Of business ethics.
Good for the career,
But not the soul.
They will die alone.

Dance with me, darling?
Until our legs buckle,
And our hearts give out,
Resist the fatal pull
Of the final pose.
When the music stops
And the band packs up
Will you still dance with me?
Will you never quit moving?
Never stand still?
Spin until dizziness blinds us
From the cold realization
That when we stop dancing
And swaying,

And twisting,
And dipping,
We realize
That in our heated waltz...
We've only just been dancing around ourselves.



1/4

"Israeli clip"

Rebecca Jones

EL FLAMENCO

by *Holly Stewart*

Everyone laughs at the wailful sounds
That escape the flamenco singer's lips,
But I understand this too well.
Sadness, joy, exhaustion, relief –
emotions displayed through the beautiful creation of a voice:
a cultural expression of – *breathe* – everything.
And I am not sophisticated in words,
or dance,
or music,
But I am so overly complicated with emotions.
I can feel what she feels.

FIBULA'S PLEA

by Amanda Hussman

The tibia acts as the stronghold.
He bears the weight the fibula cannot take.
And in return the fibula acts as support
Because not even the stronger tibia can remain without her aid.
They symbiotically dance to hold us up,
Held together with strong interosseous membrane so that they can
be one harmonious unit.
But the fibula becomes strained under the stresses of life.
She tries with all her might but is subject to compounded fractures.
But though she may break, her partner stands beside her to take
some of that weight.
Yet without her, he finds it hard to stand and collapses.
And on the medial side, should the tibia ever fall, his partner would
share the same fate.
They are vital to each other.

Now then, would you deny the fibula's aid?
And will you refuse to hold the weight should she crumble?

A SPRINKLE

by *Hannah Barker*

We haven't seen a raindrop in months.
Our Iowa-shaped hearts are going through a drought.
Each passing truck sounds like thunder.
Today the Omani sky took pity on us.
"It isn't much," she whispered,
but her murmurs were drowned
by our pleasure.
One shrieks with joy
and chases a bird.
One stands in awed silence.
A sprinkle,
not even enough to wet the sidewalk,
but a sprinkle.
As drops hit our skin,
we close our eyes,
we smell the musty air,
we begin to bloom.

ADVICE FROM YOUR FRIENDLY TOUR GUIDE AT THE SEA OF GALILEE

by Sarah Shapiro

First, don't take your shoes off, it's not holy water.
Oh, and if you are walking on water,
Step lightly;
And if you happen to trip,
don't panic! Keep in mind:
Almost no one can do it perfectly
Their first time.

And if you continue to fall, stay calm,
Panicking will only quicken your descent to the depths –
But don't be afraid, "sea" is a frightening misnomer:
It's only 141 feet, not nearly deep enough
To drown your hopes and dreams.
As you fight your way through the pelagic fogginess,
try not to think about sea monsters: our esteemed Nessie, for
example,
the Kraken, the Bäckahästen,
Chessie, Grindylows, Leviathans,
and the like.

Instead, think of how grateful you are that you are here,
and not in the Dead Sea,
where, with much higher salinity,
you might be turned to salt, like Lot's wife –
and, well, dead.

Thinking lofty, thankful thoughts such as these
might accelerate your rise to the surface,
unless you are of course distracted
by the wondrous worlds under the sea.
Do not spend time ogling over the scrimshaw beauty of the shells,
the spectacles of fish, azure, aubergine, amaranthine,
the remains of mysterious objects too disintegrated to determine,

or the skeletons of ancient fishing boats
and their late passengers.

While you're down there, however, you might as well practice your
hydrography;
Some of our guests have become experts simply from multiple tours.
And don't worry: with enough faith on your part,
and state-of-the-art technology (involving levers and pulleys) on
ours,
We'll probably be able to rescue you. Most of our participants
trust us enough to try it,
and really, if you don't,
Whose problem is that? Go on,
step in.

ALIVE

by Hana Spangler

battling cockroach
rattled bones
wearied warriors
catacombs

soil seeps
into my skin
silence now
and never been

willow winding
hellwise bent
ribcage rooting
heaven sent

coin in socket
steeped eye
giving ground
but taking sky

FINNISH UNDERWATER FISHING

by Sarah Shapiro

Two men are standing on the bottom of a lake in central Finland.
(But I am watching them from the distance of the Internet.)

They are pouring water into water,
exhaling light and iridescence.

One pushes a wheelbarrow across the icy floor,
another drives an auger,
while everything looks like a negative photograph:
turquoise-tinted.

On the other side of the dark and deep
is the surface of the lake in summer,
where I am learning to waterski. Glorious,
even the falling, even the anticipation of the
spray crashing over me, skis awkwardly disentangling.
I could lose myself
in the endless undulation
of the boat's wake,
in my friends' banter,
even in the bitter wind.

The bizarre ice fishing escapade
is over. A grinning man on the snowy side of the lake reveals that
it was all a deception,
that the divers were not standing on the floor
 but suspended,
 upside down,
 on the underside
 of the lake's surface,
like lovely human barnacles
on an icy Finnish boat.
If it wasn't so beautiful,
if it did not so resemble a modern-day myth,

I would be disappointed that they didn't catch any fish.

Maybe one day I'll take up beneath-the-ice skiing,
become a mirror-image of my friends above.

There are untold worlds down there, who knows
what I'll find: the next Atlantis,
an old wheelbarrow,
or maybe just some Finns.

Right: Brianne Hassman, "Grandpa's Farm"



LAST STAN

by Ryan Davis

Stan let the milk drip out of his mouth slowly.
It trailed down his beard like a hundred white elephants –
very small elephants –
falling down a valley covered in red brown trees in late autumn.

He sat back in his rocking chair on the porch in the dark sea of
night,
And listened to waves of crickets crash into his shore
like bugs jumping up and down on a bass drum just to feel the
earth quake.

I walked across the crooked porch boards and relished each
squeak,
like the farmer's wife with the carving knife who lived for cutting
the very essence of dignity of the mice she always dreamed would
love back...but they never did.

I pushed my boot into Stan's belly and shoved as hard as I could.
He never saw it coming –
and I never looked back up that bare gravel drive
as I walked away from the man who never made me feel alive.

MUSINGS ON FAMILY

by *Kelly Burds*

Peace is the color of my father's eyes
soft green—grayed and frayed at the edges
from divorce and marriage and fatherhood—step and biological—
and the booze
and the disease without a name that
crippled those craftsman hands, fingers forever bent and stiff
his smile remains, though, shining through the thick beard,
tan skin from years outdoors, an odd contrast to
hair as red as the Irish blood he proudly claimed...

"Deeda," that's what I called him
back in the once-upon-a-time of Billy Joel,
ugly yellow linoleum, and blue plush rabbits;
when Simon and Garfunkel was a lullaby,
when all nightmares could be cured by blankie,
when bedtime stories had the occasional
four-letter word,
just to make us laugh...

All this comes back as I stare at the old photograph,
knowing a year after the camera-flash
that smile will be framed by breathing tubes,
a vain attempt to fight the degeneration of lungs
that have been poisoned: by smoke, by toxic chemicals,
by life and livelihood...
so, with healing, peaceful tears in my eyes
I pray that when the Lord my soul does take,
Irish eyes will be there to welcome me home.

MY BODY IMAGE OUTWEIGHS YOURS

by Emily Wohlers

Marilyn Monroe was a bodacious babe who could barely contain her personality in that push up bra.

I sometimes think of her when I'm spooning Nutella into my mouth.

It's the nectar of life, you know.

OMA

by *Ryan Davis*

Ron opened the curtains.
He hated when the sun tried to push itself in through the cracks.

He looked out across the endless cornfields – and sighed.
Another January looked to be as bleak as ever –
and there was hardly a sign of life left in his dry bones.

Ron was 85 years old –
and he needed to die.
He needed it like he needed a drink of water to clear the rasp from
his ancient throat.

Ron played Call of Duty® Black Ops 2 all day long –
and he died over a 100 deaths.
And he lived over a thousand lives,
but he never lived his own.

Ron didn't know anyone all that well.
He didn't really care about anyone –
and he never had any remorse as he placed young men in graves
freshly dug –
and filled his backpack up with campers and kids who didn't know
what war was.

Ron pwned n00bs until the sun set,
then he went to sleep.

Ron never woke up,
and no one remembered him except young men
who learned from Ron that there is so much more to life than
dying.

SEA CREATURES

by Sarah Shapiro

Ghastly figures, lights in the deep sea,
are a gypsy woman's orb, showing our fortunes.
It's some sort of splendid,
juxtaposing light and dark,
natural and artificial,
pelagic and demersal.

Having fallen in love
with deep-sea darkness,
we whispered to it our secrets, and they floated
like jellyfish through shafts of light.
When we dive down to investigate,
we find our materialism has preceded us,
has furnished the ocean floor with the comforts of home.

There, a lamp you discarded,
an ugly gift from Grandma.
You discover it growing out of a fish.
Evolution and adaptation have run their currents, and now
All the little fishies are born with incandescent bulbs
for eyes.

A jellyfish puffs past you. Its tentacles brush you,
but the shock comes later,
when you notice an electric cord dangling from the viscous
creature,
The shark looks at you sorrowfully, it's all your fault,
And you begin to protest –
Hey, it was a collective mistake, it was all of us.
But the creatures are not convinced.

The court begins to gather, and you feel surrounded,

Luminous, baleful eyes stalking you from the darkness,
Silently lamenting your every move.
Surely your crimes were not much; a misdemeanor at most –
In your defense, who can blame you
for trying to bring a little light,
For attempting to illuminate
something
so forgotten
for so long?

SOME THINGS DON'T CHANGE

by Holly Stewart

I am from yellow rice and red beans,
from jumbalya to fry bread and wojapi.
I am from Dr. Seuss and the ice cream truck,
from a barbie car to horse muck.
I am from a needle and surgical thread,
from my mother crying to God from a hospital bed.
I am from a city and a small town,
from every color to only white and brown.
I am from the King James Version,
I am still from the King James Version.

STRANGERS ON THE STREET

by *Abigail Bierly*

When I was 13 years old, they asked me if I was a lesbian.

By 14, the men asked, the women just hit on me.

At 15, I was told to cheer up.

That I looked like I was going to murder someone.

When I was 16, they told me I'd probably grow out of it.

I'd be pretty one day.

At 17, they asked me when I was due.

And who the father was.

Even though I wasn't pregnant.

When I was 18, I was asked what I was going to do with the rest of my life.

And by 19, why I hadn't found a man yet.

And at 20, what in the hell do you do with a theatre major.

And at 21, when I was due.

Still not pregnant, guys.

At 22, I'm told I'll never get a man if I keep dressing/walking/dancing/talking like this.

I'm finally starting to realize that they never knew anything.

And maybe never will.

STONES

by Holly Stewart

Kardina coffee burns the back of my throat

Like the smoke of hate burns my eyes.

Shalom.

Salaam.

These are words of peace, spoken without meaning

In a land of war.

Stones cannot speak;

Yet they are telling me there's a little girl picking a morning glory

On the porch of this home.

Home.

Not house. I am tied to it.

Tied.

Like my heart to this land, like my hurt to this wall.

"But she is Rebekah, and she is beautiful."

Sukran, Rivkah.

For giving me hope

this night

As my head hits the pillow.

SUMMER STORM

by Amber Gritter

Thunder rolls along the flowing green hills
Hear her roar over the deserted plains
She scours the skies with blasts of windy chills
She cannot be held back with iron chains

Lightning flashes, streaks across the waters
Pouncing upon those in unwary homes
None are spared: wives, men, their sons or daughters
Cursed forever, over the skies she roams

Rain lashes unrelenting at creatures
Nature cannot hide from her hard-core wet
Not a thing can calm her raving features
She pounds with no sorrow, her face is set

Such the mightiness of the summer storm
See the great beauty that's in her soulful form

THE ART OF PIE-MAKING

by Hannah Barker

"After you guys are done,
does anyone want to help me make the pies?"
Tamara peeks through the wooden doors
on four of us dancing.
The others shake their heads.
It's time for their ritual smoke break.

But my head tries to nod itself off my shoulders;
nothing feels more like home in this far away place
than learning the art to pie-making from Tamara,
seeing the joy in her fingers
as they slice pears,
peel apples,
sprinkle in
cinnamon, ginger, cardamom.

She never uses a measuring cup or tablespoon.
Pies are something she knows.
This is her art.
And it is an art meant to be shared.
Tonight she shares it with me.

Afraid my untrained hands will ruin
what are meant to be her masterpieces,
I squat on my chair, nervous,
asking elementary questions.
Afraid of my knife slipping.
Afraid of adding too few spices.
Afraid of ripping the crust.

But Tamara's love of her art
far outweighs any mistake I might make.

Fruit is delicious no matter what the shape.
Spices are not an exact science.
Broken crusts can be squished together again.

With each new job she gifts me,
I discover a new piece
to my own art of pie-making,
and I listen to the honeylove
in her words of advice,
see her eyes shining,
see her hands dance
as they do what they were made to do,
as she creates her art.

THE DANCE BEGINS

by Abigail Bierly

She's in the kitchen again.
Dishes slammed with anger.
Basket set forcefully down.
I sit on the couch with my shield,
The glowing screen keeping me sane.
Rock music playing along metallicly,
The inner being cringing at all the quiet noise.
The rebellious Neanderthal returns,
Ignored but too much attention paid.
Everything and nothing simultaneously.
Drawers snapping shut.
Bags cracked open with annoyance.
The pain inside my body is insistent.
Noise threatens to crack me open.
I'm so fragile and so dull.
I sparkle some and hide more.
Resentment colors the air.
Honey with needles barely disguised.

THIS LIFE

by *Emily Wohlers*

Sometimes I can't breathe
And if you come up to me
specifically to ask how my day was
I won't be able to tell you,
because I didn't live it.
Most days I don't live.
Just because you can label it
doesn't give it the rationality you deserve.
This life gives words a thousand meanings.
Looks, a million.
Every action has a positive or negative reaction.
Every hour is new.
Every thought is vague.
And I would apologize if I had the control.

THIS THE END

by Hana Spangler

The pilot intersected sun
Then chariot began to smoke
We could not tell who'd lost or won
But Icarus' father woke

A plague upon these childish games!
They singe my soul unto the bone
Your tattled tales and whispered names
I cannot hear on telephone

Then took he up inside his hand
A scripture from which Orpheus lied
And spread a mist upon the land
Disguising hints of him who died

My lady dark Persephone!
I see you not but know you're here
Come take the carcass of our son
Or sun--whichever perished near

She shuddered when she lifted boy
And carried off to shrouded deep
He rested as a scattered toy
Will bounce upon the hearth and sleep

O woeful sheet and earth so sour!
I cannot follow past her bend
And had I clock to mark this hour
My minute would read this the end

one-act PLAYS

Judge's Note

Jackson Nickolay strikes twice in the dramatic category, first in *Stupid*. Here, a ten-year-old Rachael and her fourteen-year-old brother Todd carry on a play-within-a-play through the mechanism of making Rachael's Beanie Babies talk to one another. We get a sophisticated dialogue that is frighteningly sophisticated against the backdrop of naiveté and the childish voices we imagine the children making on behalf of the stuffed animals.

In a very different play, Abigail Bierly shows us *The Perils of Power Outages* when, in a single unlikely moment, Jerry and Karla come to terms with what it means to face one another, ourselves, and our fears. As Karla beautifully puts it, she ends up—and by extension, we end up, "...on a dangerous quest in search of the glowing ember of power."

Nickolay returns with *The Civil Dead*, in which Jake's wife Faith makes her first appearance as a distant cousin to Dickens' Jacob Marley: a ghost with a message. In a bizarre love triangle with David, boundaries both natural and supernatural are crossed as the story of Faith's faithlessness comes to the surface. By the end we feel compelled to stop and check on whether the things in this world that we think we know are truly known to us.

STUPID

by Jackson Nickolay

(Lights up on a bedroom. The setting can be as minimal or detailed as desired, but there needs to be a bed and a door. There are a brother and sister sitting in the room. There are toys out. The sister is playing with some beanie babies on the floor. The beanie babies are a Dragon named SCORCH, a cocker spaniel named SPUNKY, a Cat named TWISTER, and a Unicorn named MAGIC. TODD is sitting on the bed with SPUNKY in his hands. TODD is the older brother. About 14 years old, he is just starting to reach his maturity stage, but he is still clinging to many of his childhood traits. RACHAEL has MAGIC. RACHAEL is about 10 years old, still young at mind and fairly innocent.)

RACHAEL

(Making the unicorn talk to SPUNKY)

No, Spunky, I will not take you to the dragon. You are not worthy of entering his presence. But I will carry a message for you. I warn you that if what you ask is stupid, the dragon will fly out of his cave and burn you into little doggy bits! So choose wisely... Well? Go on, choose.

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Where's the dog food?

RACHAEL

That's what you're gonna ask? Really? Where's the dog food?

TODD

Yeah.

RACHAEL

That's a stupid question.

TODD

No, it's not.

RACHAEL

Yes, it is.

TODD

Maybe Spunky's tired or hungry...

RACHAEL

No. Spunky is the hero, and heroes don't get tired or hungry.

TODD

Yeah right.

RACHAEL

Yeah. Right!

TODD

Says who?

RACHAEL

Says me.

TODD

Well then, why don't you play Spunky?

RACHAEL

Fine. Maybe I will.

TODD

Fine.

RACHAEL

Fine.

TODD

Fine!

RACHAEL

Fine!

TODD

(Barely audible)

Fine.

RACHAEL

(Barely audible back)

Fine.

(Their verbal jousting is interrupted by a sound from offstage. The sound of two voices clearly in an argument. The sound

registers in both TODD and RACHAEL, and they react. RACHAEL starts to sink into herself, and TODD begins to get angry, but he notices his sister's reaction and, burying his own feelings, tries to lighten the mood and drown out the noise from the other room.)

TODD

Here, come on. I'll be Spunky.

RACHAEL

No. You can't. You'll just say the wrong things.

TODD

No, I won't. Come on, Rach...

(More yelling from offstage)

TODD

(With clear deliberation and fortitude.)

I'm sorry, Rach. Will you please let me play Spunky?

RACHAEL

(Holds out for a second)

OK! Here. Ahem. *(As MAGIC)* I warn you if what you ask is *stupid*, the dragon will fly out of his cave and burn you into little doggy bits! So choose wisely...

TODD

What's the dragon's name?

RACHAEL

Todd!

TODD

No, it's important. I have to know his name if I'm going to ask him a question.

RACHAEL

Well, I don't know. Burner?

TODD

That's terrible. This is a Dragon. It has to be something cool like Earthbane or Mountain Crusher.

RACHAEL

Those are stupid.

TODD

Well fine, but Burner is silly.

RACHAEL

Ok. How about Torch!

TODD

Nyah... Scorch?

RACHAEL

Ooo... I like that.

TODD

Ok. Scorch.

RACHAEL

Kay. Go on.

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Alright. Unicorn.

RACHAEL

His name is Magic.

TODD

Magic?

(RACHAEL glares at him.)

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Alright Magic, tell the most terrible high and mighty Scorch that I seek the fountain of youth in hopes of—

RACHAEL

No! You're here to save Twister!

TODD

Who's Twister now?

RACHAEL

Twister is Spunky's wife.

(RACHAEL holds up a small striped kitty beanie baby)

TODD

That's a cat.

RACHAEL

So?

TODD

Dog's don't like cats.

RACHAEL

This one does. See Twister got captured by the evil dragon Scorch who brainwashed her. But now Spunky is here to save her from his evil clutches. You're *supposed* to ask Scorch to unhand Twister, and then when he doesn't Spunky can defeat the dragon, save the day, and Twister and Spunky will live happily ever after.

TODD

I don't want to play this game.

(TODD gets up, dropping SPUNKY.)

RACHAEL

Why not?

TODD

Because, Rach, it's... just because.

RACHAEL

But—

TODD

Just no, Rach.

(In the silence there is even louder yelling heard offstage which begins to make TODD angry again while RACHAEL begins to cradle SPUNKY and TWISTER. Suddenly TODD turns back towards RACHAEL.)

TODD

You know who I want to play? I wanna play the dragon.

(TODD goes over and grabs SCORCH)

Once Spunky asks him for Twister back, Scorch flies out of his cave and attacks Spunky, who's too stupid to see it coming, so Scorch hurls him up into the air.

(TODD snatches SPUNKY away from RACHAEL and throws him up into the air)

RACHAEL

No!

TODD

And then he catches him and throws him against the mountain.

(TODD pitches SPUNKY up against the door.)

RACHAEL

Todd, stop!

(RACHAEL runs to grab SPUNKY.)

TODD

But that's not all. Then the Dragon grabs Twister.

(TODD grabs TWISTER away from RACHAEL.)

RACHAEL

Stop!

TODD

And flies her all the way up to the top of the mountain.

(TODD climbs up on top of the bed.)

RACHAEL

Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Please!

TODD

And throws her to the ground!

(TODD throws TWISTER to the ground.)

RACHAEL

Stop!

(RACHAEL grabs TWISTER and holds her and SPUNKY in her arms. She is crying now, as is TODD, but he's trying to hide it and collapses onto the bed. After a moment the argument can be heard again from offstage. It is starting to build in intensity. TODD finally gets up angrily and starts to leave the room, but as he opens the door the argument outside builds to its highest point, and there is the sound of someone pounding a counter loud enough to make the silverware in the drawer underneath rattle audibly. TODD closes the door and turns back into the room where RACHAEL is still crying. TODD wipes some of his own tears away, takes a moment to realize what he's done and try to get his control back.)

TODD

Rach...

(RACHAEL shuffles away.)

TODD

Rach, please. I'm... I'm sorry, Rachael. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said ... or done that.

(TODD sits down next to RACHAEL.)

Rachael...

RACHAEL

Why?

TODD

Well, I was mad, and I guess I just lost it—

RACHAEL

No, why are they always fighting?

TODD

I don't know, Rach...

(Beat.)

RACHAEL

(Sniffing)

That's a stupid answer.

TODD

(Smiles a little)

Yeah.

(RACHAEL shuffles over and puts her head on TODD's shoulder. TODD reaches around and gives her a hug. There is more yelling from outside the room. TODD looks down and holds his hand out for SPUNKY. RACHAEL looks up at him nervously for a second, but he smiles at her and holds out his hand. Slowly but trustingly RACHAEL gives SPUNKY to TODD.)

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

I am here to rescue my queen from the evil dragon Scorch. So you tell him to unhand her or I will fight him.

(RACHAEL looks at TODD and then slowly reaches for MAGIC.)

RACHAEL

(As MAGIC)

I don't think he'll like that very much. Are you sure you want me to tell him that?

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Absolutely.

RACHAEL

(As MAGIC)

Ok...

(RACHAEL makes MAGIC walk over to where TODD put down SCORCH)

Hey, mister Scorch Dragon sir. Spunky is here to rescue Twister. He says that if you don't unhand her he will fight you.

TODD

(As SCORCH)

What! Ha! That puny dog thinks he can beat me! I will fight him!

RACHAEL

(As MAGIC)

I don't know, mister Scorch Dragon sir. He looks pretty serious.

TODD

(As SCORCH)

Nonsense! He's a dog! I'm a dragon! Roar!

RACHAEL

(As MAGIC, smiling)

Ah!

TODD

(As SCORCH)

I see you, Spunky! I'm gonna eat you for breakfast, and you and Twister will never be together again!

(As SPUNKY)

I don't think so!

(As SCORCH)

Oh yeah! Roar!

(TODD makes SCORCH attack SPUNKY. But SPUNKY whacks the Dragon, who goes flying away. As SCORCH)

Ah-ow!

(RACHAEL laughs as TODD makes SPUNKY run over to TWISTER. As SPUNKY)

Twister. Twister! Wake up!

(TODD looks at RACHAEL pointedly, who jumps at her cue.)

RACHAEL

(As TWISTER)

Spunky?...

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Yes! Do you remember me?

RACHAEL

(As TWISTER)

.....YES! Oh, Spunky!

TODD

(As SPUNKY)

Oh, Twister!

(Gasp)

But wait!

(As SCORCH)

Roar!

(As SPUNKY)

Scorch is back!

RACHAEL

(As TWISTER)

We can take him!

TODD

(Runs over to grab SCORCH)

Roar! You cannot win! I will eat you both!

RACHAEL

(As TWISTER)

Oh no, you won't!

(TODD and RACHAEL proceed to beat the living daylights out of SCORCH with TWISTER and SPUNKY. The fight culminates with them making TWISTER and SPUNKY throw SCORCH against the door.)

TODD and RACHAEL

(As SPUNKY and TWISTER)

Hurray!

TODD

We beat him!

RACHAEL

Yeah! Take that, stupid dragon! Together we're invincible!

(TODD and RACHAEL make SPUNKY and TWISTER hug each other. There is a knock on the door. It is opened and their MOM steps in. She has obviously been crying, but she smiles weakly at them.)

MOM

Todd. Rachael.

RACHAEL

Hi, Mom.

MOM

(Smiling)

Hi. Hey listen, can you come out to the living room for a minute? Your Dad and I have something to tell you.

(TODD and RACHAEL look at each other.)

(Beat.)

TODD

Sure, Mom. We'll be right there.

MOM

Thanks.

(Mom goes back out. Beat. TODD puts down SPUNKY, stands and holds his hand out to RACHAEL. RACHAEL looks at

TWISTER for a moment, then up at TODD, and then looks back at TWISTER as she slowly puts her down right next to SPUNKY. She takes a moment, then puts SPUNKY's paw on TWISTER's paw. She then reaches for TODD's hand, and they slowly begin to walk out of the room. TODD's eyes linger on SPUNKY and TWISTER for a moment as they walk away, but then he turns, and they both exit the stage through the door. Lights out on SPUNKY and TWISTER center stage holding hands.)

End scene.



Sarah Odom, "From Heaven's Eye"

THE PERILS OF POWER OUTAGES

by Abigail Bierly

JERRY

Just give me the damn flashlight!

KARLA

Get your own damn flashlight! There's another one in this house somewhere.

JERRY

And how am I supposed to find it in the dark?

KARLA

Use your cellphone.

JERRY

It's dead.

KARLA

Well, that's your own fault. If you charged your phone every night—

JERRY

That kills the battery! My teacher told me.

KARLA

Your teacher is an idiot. Even Wikipedia disagrees with him.

JERRY

Fine. Whatever. Look, give me the flashlight, and I'll go find another flashlight and come back with it so we'll both have one.

KARLA

And leave me sitting in the dark? Have you met me?

JERRY

(Muttering)

Was just an idea.

KARLA

An idea that completely disregards me and my feelings as usual. Why can't you be like Disney Channel brothers?

JERRY

What, pretending to be in high school when I'm fifty?

KARLA

Ew, no. Not what I meant. Never mind.

(Pause.)

JERRY

You could go with me.

KARLA

Yeah. Crutch in one hand, flashlight in the other, going up and down stairs. What could go wrong there?

JERRY

I could hold the flashlight.

KARLA

You'd run away with it.

JERRY

You could try trusting me for a change like a good Disney Channel Sister.

KARLA

(With a little laugh.)

Shut up. You just want the flashlight.

JERRY

Well, it is our only manly flashlight.

KARLA

Because it's green and black? Or because it's the brightest one we own and you're trying to make excuses as to why you should have the only good flashlight in the house and I should get stuck either in the dark or with the Disney Princess crappy flashlight I got when I was three that barely is good for anything except a pitiful soft glow?

JERRY

I'm gonna go with because it's green and black.

KARLA

Whatever.

JERRY

Give it to me, or I'll take it from you.

KARLA

Jerry Stevenson, you even try that, and I'll beat you up with my crutch.

JERRY

I'll take the crutch from you, too.

KARLA

Then I'll kick you with my good leg.

JERRY

Then I'll dodge.

KARLA

Then I'll punch you in the face.

JERRY

Come on! You'd only be in the dark for like five minutes! Maybe even less. I could probably find the other flashlight in three minutes.

KARLA

The crappy flashlight. No dice. You've been aware of my fear of the dark for how long?

JERRY

Since that time when I was six and you were three and mom bought you that other flashlight so you'd quit crying all night long about the monsters in your room.

KARLA

Hey, don't joke about that. There was something in that closet, I swear.

JERRY

Your clothes. Oh, and that creepy sheep you had in there.

KARLA

Mr. Fluffy is not creepy!

JERRY

I'd completely understand if you wanted a flashlight to keep an eye on that fella. Face of pure wooly demon, that thing.

KARLA

(Trying not to laugh.)

Ok, so his face is a little—

JERRY

Squashed and evil with shifty little black eyes.

KARLA

I wonder whatever happened to him.

JERRY

I don't know. The attic, maybe? We could go looking for him when your leg gets better. Besides, I kind of want to see if I can find my truck.

KARLA

That was one awesome truck. Mr. Fluffy used to ride it when you weren't looking.

JERRY

I knew it! I knew it! That little evil plotting sheep!

(They both laugh.)

JERRY (Cont.)

Alright. Tell you what. Since you are injured, dear sister, and because a man—

KARLA

You're a man now?

JERRY

Because man must never be above sacrifice, I will concede that flashlight to you and take the pink flashlight for myself, although I shudder at the thought, after I find it using the one you are currently holding.

KARLA

Jerry, no. We've been over this so many times. I know it's completely irrational. I know it's ridiculous. My intelligent brain tells me I'm being an idiot, but I just cannot take even a few moments sitting here in the dark.

JERRY

Three minutes, Kar. Just three.

KARLA

No.

JERRY

Two minutes.

KARLA

No.

JERRY

Thirty seconds and a bowl of ice cream.

KARLA

(Laughs.)

Tempting, but no.

JERRY

Well, then, what do you suggest we do?

KARLA

Sit in here until the power comes back on.

JERRY

And if one of us has to go to the bathroom or get a drink or get a drink for another person who happens to not be entirely mobile at the moment?

KARLA

Well—

JERRY

And by one of us I mean me.

KARLA

(Sarcastically)

No, really? I never would have guessed.

JERRY

Thirty seconds, ice cream, and letting you keep full control of the remote for a week.

KARLA

A month.

JERRY

Two weeks.

KARLA

Three.

JERRY

You drive a hard bargain, woman, but I'd expect nothing less from a Stevenson. You've got yourself a deal.

(KARLA hands JERRY the flashlight, but doesn't let go. Long pause. KARLA gets a strange look on her face and begins to

shake and cry.)

JERRY

(Softly)

Kar?

KARLA

I can't. I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't I can't!

JERRY

It's ok.

KARLA

I'm trying, and I really, really can't!

(JERRY lets go of the flashlight and embraces KARLA.)

JERRY

I know, Kar, I know. It was worth a try, right? Come on Kar, it's ok. We'll figure something else out.

KARLA

No.

JERRY

No?

(KARLA dries her eyes and sits upright, pulling out of JERRY's hug.)

KARLA

We'll go together. I mean I'll go with you to find the other one.

JERRY

Crutch in one hand, flashlight in the other?

KARLA

(Looking him in the eyes)

I'll manage.

JERRY

(Putting his hand on her shoulder)

I'll help you.

KARLA

(Small smile)

Thanks.

(JERRY helps KARLA up and hands her the crutch.)

KARLA

But you have to use the other one.

JERRY

Well, that thing did fend off all manner of evil and nightmares for you for years, so I guess that makes it badass. Which makes the pink glitteryness of it pale in comparison.

KARLA

And you deserve a badass flashlight. You're pretty epic.

JERRY

Ha. Thanks, kid. You're not so bad yourself. Let's go beat the living daylights out of the dark together as we—

KARLA

Go on a dangerous quest in search of the glowing ember of power.

JERRY

Glowing ember of power. I like it. I knew there was a reason I didn't ship you off to Antarctica when we were little.

KARLA

Let's go.

(They go offstage together.)

End scene.

THE CIVIL DEAD

by Jackson Nickolay

CHARACTERS:

JAKE: 28 years old. He has been happily married to his wife Faith for 7 years. He is a medium sized, medium height all around medium guy.

FAITH: 28 years old. She has been married to Jake for 7 years. She is a beautiful woman, a little taller than Jake.

DAVID: 29 years old. He is a tall, dark haired, handsome man.

(The scene opens in a blackout. A light comes on offstage left and the sound of a blow dryer is heard. This noise continues for a few seconds then a loud pop is heard and there is a flash of bright blue light from off stage as the lights go to black again.)

(Beat)

(The front door opens and we see the silhouette of a man in the doorway)

JAKE

Faith!

(The silhouette turns the light on. As the lights come up, we get our first view of the room. It is well furnished with a mixture of artistic decorations and baseball paraphernalia. We see JAKE at the door. He is a man of medium build and medium height. He is not particularly attractive but not unpleasant to look at. He is well dressed as if he just came from work. As he walks in, DAVID comes in behind him. DAVID is a tall, dark haired, handsome man. He is also dressed as if he just came from work.)

JAKE

Faith! ... Yeah, she's not here yet.

DAVID

You sure?

JAKE

Yeah, I told you she usually doesn't come home 'till late.

DAVID

Sure... Hey, thanks for meeting, Jake... I....

JAKE

Yeah, no problem. You sounded like you had something on your mind when you called. Can I get you a drink?

DAVID

Yeah, yeah, sure. I'd... I'd like a drink.

(JAKE goes up to a mini bar and pours them both a small drink. He hands one to DAVID and sits down.)

JAKE

So what's on your mind, David?

DAVID

(Taking a sip of his drink)

Well...

(He takes a larger swig of his drink.)

JAKE

Whoa, Dave, slow down.

(DAVID finishes the rest of his drink in one gulp. He sets down his glass and looks at JAKE.)

DAVID

Alright... whew... Jake... I ...

JAKE

...Yes?

DAVID

I... Can I use your bathroom?

JAKE

What?

DAVID

Can I just use your bathroom real quick?

JAKE

This is what you wanted to tell me?

DAVID

No, no I just need to—can I just—?

JAKE

Sure, Dave, just, use that one.

(Points stage right.)

The master bathroom is a mess.

DAVID

Thanks.

JAKE

Sure.

(DAVID exits stage right. JAKE rolls his eyes and picks up a magazine from the coffee table. As he's reading FAITH comes into the room from the stage left doorway to the bedroom. She is dressed in all grey, and her face is very pale. Her hair is standing up on end in a frizzy afro.)

FAITH

Jake...

JAKE

Oh, hey. I didn't think you were home.

(JAKE looks at her for a second and then back at his magazine. Then he stops reading and does a double take.)

JAKE

Whoa! What on earth are you doing?

FAITH

Jake... I can explain...

JAKE

What are you—? Is this like a new look or something? 'Cause I gotta say colors are a much better option.

FAITH

No, no, I... didn't try to do this. I...

JAKE

You...?

FAITH

Jake... I think I'm dead.

(Beat)

JAKE

(Laughing)

Oh! Ah ha ha ha, very funny. Wow. You're crazy! How much time did you spend getting your hair to stand up like that?

FAITH

Jake...

JAKE

And then all that make up, too. Jeez, all of this for a joke? You're gonna have to take even more time taking it off than you did putting it—

FAITH

Jake!

(JAKE stops laughing and finally takes a second to look at FAITH.)

FAITH

I'm dead.

JAKE

Faith, there's—

(laughing)

You're not dead. I'm talking to you right now!

FAITH

I know but I— There's something that doesn't feel right.

JAKE

Alright, the joke's over. Stop playing around and—

FAITH

No, Jake. I'm not playing. I'm... I'm serious.

JAKE

You're not dead. How could you've died?

FAITH

Well, I remember I was drying my hair, and then I—

(FAITH and JAKE say the next line simultaneously.)

JAKE and FAITH

Dropped the dryer in the sink.

FAITH

Yeah... How'd you know?

JAKE

C'mon, Faith. If you were trying to be funny, you should have gone with something more original. That's the oldest gag in the book. Look, just go and wash the makeup off and—

FAITH

I'm not kidding, Jake. Go check the bathroom.

JAKE

Faith, I'm...

FAITH

Go check the bathroom.

JAKE

I'm not gonna—

FAITH

Do it.

JAKE

Ok, I'm going!

(JAKE gets up and walks offstage left. FAITH goes to a reflective piece of artwork that is on display and looks at herself. Soon JAKE re-enters looking shell-shocked.)

FAITH

Jake?

(JAKE looks over at her. He then very quickly grabs a cross that was hung on the wall and holds it between him and FAITH.)

JAKE

Stay back!

FAITH

Jake, what are you doing?

JAKE

(Backing up around the room)

What are you?

FAITH

Jake, it's me! I'm your wife!

JAKE

No, my wife is dead in there on the floor of the bathroom! What are you!?!

FAITH

Jake, it's me. Ok? Just sit down and calm down.

JAKE

How am I supposed to calm down? You're lying dead in the next room, and yet I'm talking to you here... How is... what are... how?

(He is interrupted by the sound of a door opening and closing. They both look offstage.)

JAKE

David!

FAITH

David's here? Why?

JAKE

He...he... said he needed to talk to me about something.

FAITH

Oh, did he?

JAKE

Yeah, he—

(DAVID enters. He is not looking up so he doesn't see JAKE or FAITH.)

JAKE

David!

DAVID

Alright, listen, Jake. This is going to be really hard to hear, but you're just gonna have to hear me out.

JAKE

David, I...

FAITH

(To DAVID)

What are you doing?

DAVID

No... Jake... listen. I should have told you sooner. I just didn't—

JAKE

Uh, David...

DAVID

(Still looking away)

Just listen, Jake. This is hard enough already.

FAITH

Hellllooooo! Daaaavid...

DAVID

Alright... whew... Here we go.

FAITH

David... David, are you ignoring me?

(DAVID doesn't react to FAITH.)

Can he not see me?

JAKE

David!

(DAVID looks up.)

You, uh, notice anything... uh... weird around here?

(DAVID looks at JAKE quizzically. FAITH goes up in front of his face and waves her hand back and forth in front of him.)

DAVID

Jake? What are you talking about?

JAKE

Uh...nothing.

DAVID

Look... I really need to tell you this, Jake.

(FAITH has begun to get more and more uncomfortable as DAVID talks.)

JAKE

Yeah... uh, sure... um...

FAITH

Tell him to leave. We need to figure other things out.

JAKE

I don't really think I can just put this off.

DAVID

No, I don't think we can.

JAKE

Ah... no, I was talking to—

FAITH

Jake, just get him outta here.

DAVID

Look, Jake, I'll just tell you.

FAITH

Oh shut up, David!

(DAVID doesn't react to her. Their next lines are spoken in unison.)

FAITH

Jake, we really need to figure out what's going on here. He shouldn't be here right now. Get him to go away right now! Jake! Right now!

DAVID

Like I said, I should have told you this a long time ago. And I know I can't really make it right anymore, but you gotta believe me I've been feeling awful this whole time and—

JAKE

SHUT UP!

(Both DAVID and FAITH stop talking. JAKE collapses into a chair with his head in his hands. During the following line FAITH sneaks around behind DAVID and picks up a vase from one of the displays.)

DAVID

Jake, this is hard for me too. But I gotta tell ya this. It's about Faith. See, she and—

(JAKE looks up and see's FAITH standing behind DAVID with the vase held up above her head.)

JAKE

David! Look out!

(DAVID whips around just in time to see what he perceives as a floating vase come hurtling towards his head. He ducks out of the

way just in time and the vase crashes to the floor, shattering into pieces. DAVID looks in shock at JAKE as FAITH goes over and picks up a baseball from one of the shelves.)

DAVID

Jake, your baseball is floating...

(FAITH hurls the baseball at DAVID, who barely dodges it.)

DAVID

What the hell is going on here?!

(FAITH continues to grab things from the shelves and hurl them at DAVID.)

JAKE

(Running to help DAVID)

So, you're not gonna believe this...

DAVID

Oh, yeah!

(Dodging another vase)

Try me!

JAKE

Faith's ghost is in here.

DAVID

...You're right. I don't believe you.

FAITH

Oh really!?!

(Hurling a lamp at him)

DAVID

Whoa! It's impossible! If her ghost is here, then she has to be... No! She can't be!

JAKE

Go on see for yourself. I'll hold her off.

(JAKE shoves DAVID into the bedroom and then turns, facing off with FAITH.)

JAKE

Faith, what's goin' on here?

(FAITH has gone to the wall and ripped a baseball bat off of a display. She starts making a beeline toward the master bedroom. JAKE puts himself between her and the room.)

FAITH

I'll show that double crossing son of a b—

JAKE

Faith, stop!

FAITH

Outta my way, Jake! Outta my way, or else I'm comin' back for you!

(Wielding the bat menacingly)

(During the slight pause that follows this statement, a high pitched scream is heard from offstage in the bedroom. They both pause and look to the bedroom. DAVID comes out of the room in complete hysterics, screaming his head off. He stands completely still just inside the room.)

JAKE

(Walking toward DAVID)

David, it's alright. David ... Alright, at least breathe.

(DAVID stops screaming, takes and enormous deep breath and starts screaming again)

JAKE

David. Stop it!

(JAKE goes toward DAVID to try to restrain him, but just as JAKE gets to DAVID, FAITH raises her bat at DAVID threateningly and takes a few steps toward him. DAVID takes off running around the room. JAKE tries to chase after him and catch him but DAVID eludes him. During this chase FAITH slowly makes her way upstage with the bat. She stands near the doorway to the bedroom. As DAVID comes running past her trying to get away from JAKE, she hits him with the bat hard enough to throw him offstage and into the bedroom.)

(Beat)

JAKE

What did you do?!

FAITH

(Looking at the bat)

Well, that worked better than I thought it would.

(JAKE starts to move toward the doorway to the bedroom.)

You stay back.

JAKE

Faith, you could have really hurt him!

FAITH

Good! I hope I did.

JAKE

Why are you doing this?

FAITH

It's for your own good, Jake. Just trust me.

JAKE

Oh sure, you just clubbed a man with a bat!

FAITH

It's better this way. Trust me. You don't need to hear what he has to say.

(Beat)

JAKE

You know what he was going to tell me? What was it? What was it, Faith?

(JAKE finally gets it.)

JAKE

Oh my... Faith! How could you?

FAITH

Oh, what, Jake?

JAKE

Why would you do this to me! To us!

FAITH

Jake, I don't even know what you're talking about.

JAKE

How long has it been, huh? How long have you two been—

FAITH

Jake, shut up, ok! You want to be next?

(Indicating the bat)

There never was anything, alright!

JAKE

You were... you were actually...

FAITH

Oh stop it, Jake! We never did anything, there wasn't anything!

DAVID

(Offstage)

Of course there was.

(JAKE and FAITH both turn and look to see DAVID come walking onstage from the bedroom. He now is wearing matching grey clothing and has an overall grey complexion.)

DAVID

I'm actually fairly hurt that you would say otherwise, Faith.

JAKE

You killed him!

(FAITH throws the bat at DAVID who catches it.)

DAVID

Like you didn't hit me hard enough the first time.

FAITH

You deserved it, you double-crossing piece of—

DAVID

I didn't double-cross you.

JAKE

You double-crossed me...

DAVID

I told you I was going to tell him.

FAITH

And I told you that if you told him, it would be over for us.

DAVID

It was the right thing to do. Besides it was the only way we could be together.

JAKE

You are aware that I am right here, right?

FAITH

(Ignoring JAKE)

I specifically told you not to tell him, and you went right ahead and did it anyway.

DAVID

Because I love you, Fay!

JAKE

Seriously!

DAVID

(Ignoring JAKE)

I wanted to be with you more than anything. And not the way it's been, but legitimately. It was the only way we could be together.

JAKE

(Yelling)

Oh, come on! I'm right here!

FAITH

Oh can it, will ya?!

(JAKE is dumbfounded into silence.)

DAVID

I only did it because I love you.

FAITH

You know in a very strange way that actually makes sense.

DAVID

This whole thing is strange.

FAITH

I don't know. You look kinda good in grey.

DAVID

Not as good as you.

(FAITH smiles. DAVID kisses FAITH as JAKE looks away in disbelief.)

DAVID

Forgive me?

FAITH

I guess so.

(FAITH grabs DAVID and kisses him back. JAKE stands there for a few seconds as they kiss. He finally walks up to the only remaining vase in the room. He picks it up, holds it high over his head and sends it crashing to the floor at his feet. JAKE finally has their attention.)

JAKE

Yeah, hi. Still here!

DAVID

Jake, I should've told you—

JAKE

Nyablargada! Don't. Even. Go there. The only reason you're still alive, *pal*, is because you're dead.

(Beat.)

FAITH

Jake, I—

JAKE

Save it.

(JAKE starts to walk towards the door.)

FAITH

Jake, where are you going?

JAKE

(Opening the door and standing in the doorway)

Oh ho, you know where I'm going? I'm going to the nearest cathedral I can locate, and I'm gonna find me some holy water, and if that doesn't work I think I'm gonna try some silver crosses, or maybe I'll call up the freakin' Ghost Busters! I'm gonna come after your cheating little ectoplasmic spirits in any and every way I can!

DAVID

(Picking up the baseball bat)

Well, I don't think we can let you do that, Jake.

(There is a pause as the tension builds. JAKE quickly pulls the door closed as DAVID hurls the bat at him. The door closes in time, and the bat hits the closed door. DAVID and FAITH both tear after him. All three can be heard yelling offstage.)

FAITH

Jake!

DAVID

Jake, get back here!

JAKE

Stay back! Get away from me, you hear me?! I'm gonna—AH!!!

(Suddenly there is the sound of a horn blaring, squealing breaks, and the thud of something being hit by a car. After a few moments DAVID and FAITH come back in the front door.)

DAVID

Wow.

FAITH

Yeah.

DAVID

Didn't see that coming.

FAITH

Neither did he.

(Beat)

DAVID

Well, I guess it's just you and me now.

FAITH

(Smiling)

Hmm, that's not such a bad thing.

DAVID

Not at all.

(They kiss again. As they are kissing JAKE enters from the bedroom. He is dressed in matching grey clothes and grey complexion. He observes them kissing for a moment and then goes up to the display on the wall where he pulls off the second baseball bat. At the sound, DAVID and FAITH whip around.)

JAKE

(Pounding the bat in his hand)

I. Am going to kill. Both of you.

(Lights out.)

End scene.

THIRTY DOLLARS EVEN

by Jacob Christiansen

CHARACTERS (in no particular order):

MUSICIAN: Talented, urban, a product of almost any big city's downtown lifestyle. Doesn't make his/her living playing music on a street corner, but isn't rich. Young.

GUY: A young man eager to make something of himself. The every-man. An intern at a local company.

CAPITALIST: An aged business man. Profit-minded, used to being in charge. A product of the world of big companies.

ASSISTANT: The capitalist's assistant.

JESSIE: Homeless, jaded. A veteran screwed over by his country. Used to being invisible.

BARISTA: Well-liked by the neighborhood inhabitants, a character. Wise, crafty. Middle-aged.

REVOLUTIONARY: Young, idealistic, concerned with "the state of the world." A product of any college's philosophy program.

PERSONS (m/f): Any number and type of persons who make walk through the street as the scene commences. Some may stop to listen to the **MUSICIAN**, some may stop to listen to the **REVOLUTIONARY**, some may simply walk on.

THE PLAY:

(At Rise: A typical, busy downtown street corner of any major city. At one end of the stage stands a **REVOLUTIONARY**, preaching on a soapbox of some kind. He yells into a megaphone at the passing **PERSONS**. He hands out copies of the Communist Manifesto. Some may stop and listen, but largely the **PERSONS** just continue on and ignore him. Many are simply irritated at his presence.

Across the stage are a **CAPITALIST** and his **ASSISTANT**. They stand next to a limousine with smoke coming out of the engine. The **ASSISTANT** is frantically trying to call a mechanic. The **CAPITALIST** is watching the **REVOLUTIONARY** speak, and is disgusted.

In the center of the stage sits a **MUSICIAN** playing an instrument, perhaps a guitar, a cello, or a set of street drums. The possibilities of instruments to be played are endless, as long

as the actor can talk whilst playing and it fits the scene. The music played is lighthearted and fun, at first.

Sitting next to the MUSICIAN, is JESSIE. He is begging. His sign reads, "HOMELESS, STARVING, PLEASE HELP." Both JESSIE and the MUSICIAN have containers for collecting money in front of them. Throughout the scene, PERSONs come by and put money in MUSICIAN's container. Few, if any, put money in JESSIE's container.

A small coffee stand and a BARISTA are also in the scene. PERSONs buy coffee from the BARISTA throughout the scene.)

REVOLUTIONARY

(Speaking into megaphone)

"In short, the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things... They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!"

(The REVOLUTIONARY continues to speak into megaphone, but both his speech and the cheers/boos of the PERSONs are silent—pantomime.

GUY

(Frantically, in a hurry)

Excuse me! Yes, yes, hello. I need seven coffees as fast as you can.

BARISTA

Seven coffees? That's a lot of caffeine for a little lightweight like yourself.

GUY

(Dismissively)

Yes, well, they're not all for me obviously. Now, I need two black, one decaf, one—

BARISTA

Boss sent you on a coffee run. Am I right? I'm right.

GUY

You're right. Two black, one decaf, one caramel latte, two pumpkin lattes, and a vanilla Frappuccino with an extra shot of espresso for me.

(The BARISTA rings up the orders.)

BARISTA

That'll be \$30 even.

GUY

Even? How is that possible?

BARISTA

Alright, it was \$30.10, but I'll spot you the dime, kid.

(BARISTA begins making the coffee, but is continually interrupted by PERSONs also wanting to buy coffee.)

GUY

Um, thanks. That's nice of you.

BARISTA

You know, I see you come by here every day, always in a hurry. You've never stopped at my little stand before.

GUY

The coffee shop down the street is too far away. I'm trying to shave a few minutes off my time.

BARISTA

Ahh, the suck-up sprint.

(He laughs. Then, to the MUSICIAN)

We know all about that, don't we, Sinatra?

MUSICIAN

Been running the suck-up sprint for years, man.

GUY

Sinatra?

MUSICIAN

It's just a nickname, man. You know.

(He gestures to his instrument.)

My music and all.

BARISTA

You got a big promotion coming up, right? That's why you're in a hurry?

GUY

Well, that's the hope anyway. I just want to get somewhere, you know?

BARISTA

(gesturing to REVOLUTIONARY)

Don't let him hear you say that.

REVOLUTIONARY

(Still reading from the Communist Manifesto)

"Thus, the aristocracy took their revenge by singing lampoons on their

new masters and whispering in his ears sinister prophesies of coming catastrophe."

(He returns to pantomime.)

BARISTA

You sure picked a hell of a day to stop here for coffee.

GUY

I'll say. What's going on?

BARISTA

Not sure I could say. I haven't been paying attention much. Some kind of protestor I think. Been here all morning. I've never seen him before.

CAPITALIST

(Overhearing, joining the conversation)

Humph, typical. There's always something to protest isn't there. I tell you the economy hasn't been this good since 9/11. Things are finally looking up. And yet there he goes. Ranting about how bad everything is.

REVOLUTIONARY

(Reading)

"In order to arouse sympathy, the aristocracy was obliged to lose sight, apparently, of its own interests, and to formulate its indictment against the bourgeoisie in the interest of the exploited working class alone!"

(He takes a break from speaking. He may drink water, talk to the PERSONS, etc.)

GUY

I think that's Marx he's reading. The... Uhh... The...

BARISTA

The Communist Manifesto.

GUY

Yes. That's it.

CAPITALIST

Nothing but the ramblings of a Russian drunkard.

GUY

Actually, Marx was German.

BARISTA

(Warding off the CAPITALIST's angry reply)

All I know is that he brings in a crowd. And crowds want coffee.
(jokingly) Who knew revolution was so good for business?

(GUY laughs at this joke, CAPITALIST glares at him, and he stops.)

CAPITALIST

That's easy to say, isn't it? But in his world you wouldn't get to own your little coffee stand here. Private ownership is evil.

BARISTA

Well, I don't own this one! I'm a barista, not a businessman. And every barista knows that even a rebel loves coffee.

(REVOLUTIONARY walks toward stand.)

BARISTA

See? Here he comes.

CAPITALIST

Good. I'd like to give him a piece of my mind.

ASSISTANT

(Holding speaker piece of phone covered, calling)

Boss! Boss! The tow truck guy needs to talk to you personally. I tried to tell him that you're busy but—

CAPITALIST

(Walking towards ASSISTANT)

Why can't you handle this?

ASSISTANT

I tried. But like I said the guy said he—

CAPITALIST

(Takes the ASSISTANT's phone, and hands ASSISTANT his own phone.)

Call a cab while I'm doing this. I want to get out of here.

ASSISTANT

Yes, sir.

REVOLUTIONARY

(To BARISTA)

Small coffee, black.

BARISTA

Two dollars even.

REVOLUTIONARY

Even?

GUY

Just go with it.

REVOLUTIONARY

I don't have that.

BARISTA

(Kindly, willing to help, not harshly)

Well, how much do you have?

REVOLUTIONARY

I'm afraid I don't have any money on me.

BARISTA

How did you expect to pay for your coffee?

REVOLUTIONARY

I thought you might spare some of your sweet black nectar for a good cause.

BARISTA

What kind of good cause? All I've heard is you yelling all morning.

REVOLUTIONARY

Revolution, sir. Revolution against the capitalist forces which oppress us.

BARISTA

Sorry. No can do. Those capitalist forces would be pretty mad at me if I just handed out free coffee.

REVOLUTIONARY

Well, then free yourself from their control.

(The BARISTA doesn't answer. To GUY)

How about you, sir? Willing to help a budding revolutionary?

GUY

You want me to lend you money? So you can go back to screaming about how bad money is?

REVOLUTIONARY

I think you're twisting my words. I don't care about the money, I just want a cup of coffee.

(To the PERSONs around the stand)

Anyone? Will anyone here buy my a cup of coffee?

(No one answers.)

MUSICIAN

Ain't nobody gonna lend you money, man. You been disturbing the peace here all morning.

(There is a general grumble of agreement from the PERSONs.)

REVOLUTIONARY

Well, at least I've been doing something. What have you been doing? Sitting on your ass playing music all day?

MUSICIAN

(Lightly, as a joke)

"Those... who work, acquire nothing, and those who acquire anything, do not work." That's your man Marx, isn't it?

(The crowd laughs.)

REVOLUTIONARY

That... that is a total misconstruction of his words.

MUSICIAN

Calm down, man. It was a joke.

(GUY's phone rings. He separates himself from the crowd to answer it. The argument may continue in pantomime for a bit, but eventually the crowd breaks up and continues on their way. The REVOLUTIONARY goes back to his soapbox and sits, reading his Communist Manifesto. The MUSICIAN returns to making music, casually watching/listening to GUY.)

GUY

Hello?... Martha?... Oh shit, MARTHA! *(He has clearly forgotten his reason for being on this street.)* Yes, I'm going to be there as soon as I can. I'm getting the coffee as we speak... I've got plenty of time yet, right? The representatives aren't supposed to be here until 10, we still have a half hour... Yes, tell Mr. Davis my presentation is all finished. Did you print the pamphlets I needed?... The pamphlets, Martha. I emailed you the layout yesterday—Don't tell me they aren't done... Damn it, Martha. They need to be done before the meeting... Well, get them done. I'll be there as soon as I can.

(Hangs up)

Goddamnit.

MUSICIAN

Things not going so well in corporate-ville, Mr. Big Shot?

GUY

Who?

MUSICIAN

You. Mr. Big Shot. Fancy suit, briefcase, hell, you even got the shakey-eye from one too many coffees. You got some kinda problem, right? Some girl... uh... Mary? Marci? Martha?

GUY

Were you eavesdropping on me?

MUSICIAN

It ain't eavesdropping if I can't help it. Hell, if can I hear you over all

this?

(Gestures to instrument)

You know you got problems.

GUY

No, I don't!

MUSICIAN

Why are you denying it? You got problems, right? Nobody around here hides it. We all got problems, Mr. Big Shot. Take my good pal Jessie over there. Problems like you wouldn't believe. Fought and bled for this country, but doesn't have a buck to his name. Good ol' Uncle Sam gave him a big boot right in the ass—

GUY

Look, I don't have time for this, alright? Is my coffee done yet?

BARISTA

You ordered seven coffees, kid. And you're not my only customer here. It'll be awhile.

MUSICIAN

Stay a bit, listen to the music. Being on the streets will be good for you—open your eyes a bit.

GUY

I'm in a bit of a hurry.

MUSICIAN

"Got plenty of time." Isn't that what you told that girl? Martha? You still have a half hour, right?

GUY

Well, a half-hour until the meeting starts. But I have to set-up, prep the slideshow, print my notes, brush my teeth—

MUSICIAN

Man, do you hear yourself? You been trapped in your little cubicle too long—

GUY

How did you know I worked in a cubicle?

MUSICIAN

—Street music will breathe some life into you.

GUY

I've already got a life.

MUSICIAN

Not much of one.

GUY

What the hell do you know? I happen to love my life.

MUSICIAN

Of course you do, Mr. Big Shot, of course you do. Let me pose a hypothetical question, alright? Say you go back to corporate-ville, and Martha has finished all your pamphlets, and you have your big meeting with the representatives, and it all goes perfect. You get that promotion. Then what? You achieved everything you wanted to, right?

GUY

No.

MUSICIAN

No. You didn't. You keep working for the next promotion, the next job. Hoping someday you'll make the big chair, right?

GUY

How is that coffee coming?

MUSICIAN

Say you make it there one day, Mr. Big Shot. You make CEO. Then you'll be satisfied, right? When you're old and sitting in that big leather chair, you'll be able to think back on little kindergarten Big-Shot and know that he'd be proud of you, right? Spending your whole day behind a desk. Exactly what you always wanted for yourself, right?

GUY

The coffee?

BARISTA

Look, I'm working on it.

MUSICIAN

When's the last time you picked up a guitar?

GUY

What? How did you know—

MUSICIAN

That you used to play? Because that never leaves you. It's in your bones, man. I can see it in the way you stand, the way you move. Oh yeah, you used to play, and you loved it. Where's that guy? Would he be proud of you right now? Running coffee and kissing ass?

GUY

Sometimes you have to be practical. We can't all just sit around on the street making music.

MUSICIAN

Now you sound like our dear friend Mr. Marx over there.

GUY
This is ridiculous. I don't have time for this.

MUSICIAN
Why not?

GUY
I have a job to—

MUSICIAN
Why not, Mr. Big Shot? Why don't you play with me? Right now?

GUY
I don't want to—

MUSICIAN
Why not? Just tell me why not?

GUY
Because I don't want to end up like him!

(Gesturing to JESSIE)

CAPITALIST
That's right, boy. You understand. At least someone on this street does.

GUY
What?

CAPITALIST
I said you get it, boy. Sitting around like bums? It makes us bums. I mean look around. Guys like us? We don't want that do we? We want to make something of our lives.

GUY
Yeah, I guess.

MUSICIAN
That's funny. That's real funny, man. You think you made something of your life?

CAPITALIST
At least I'm not begging on the street.

(Gesturing to JESSIE)

REVOLUTIONARY
That's rich.

(The next two lines are said simultaneously.)

GUY
What now?

CAPITALIST
What did you say?

REVOLUTIONARY

It's selfish pigs like you who put him there. People who spend their whole lives with their head in their wallets trying to ignore the people dying right in front of your nose.

GUY

Please tell me my coffee's done.

REVOLUTIONARY

Want to take your coffee and run, do you? Spent too long outside. Too long among the real people?

GUY

No, I'm not—

CAPITALIST

Enough. We are hardworking men with somewhere to be.

(The next two lines are said simultaneously.)

CAPITALIST

Just because our lives haven't lead us to marijuana and failed communist ramblings doesn't mean we're bad people.

REVOLUTIONARY

You people always have somewhere to be—somewhere to hide from what is sitting here in plain sight. The byproduct of your greed.

GUY

(Defensively)

Look, I'm not hiding from anything. I have a meeting, that's all.

REVOLUTIONARY

Yes, you and your seven coffees have a meeting, don't you. And you'll talk about market predictions and business strategies. Money money money! All the while people like *him*—

(Gesturing at JESSIE)

—sit in cesspools of suffering because you all choose to ignore it!

CAPITALIST

Oh, for pity's sake. This—

REVOLUTIONARY

Don't talk to me about pity. You walked right past this man and didn't even look at him. What? Your pity doesn't have five dollars for a starving man.

CAPITALIST

He made his own choices. It's not my job to save him from the life he earned.

REVOLUTIONARY

You built his future the minute you chose to ignore him.

CAPITALIST

You want me to do something for his future? Fine.

(He pulls a few papers out of his briefcase and hands them to JESSIE.)

That's an application for an entry-level position at my company. Now he has a future, are you satisfied?

REVOLUTIONARY

Satisfied? You didn't give him anything but a few sheets of paper.

CAPITALIST

Now he has the same chance as anyone. That's fair.

REVOLUTIONARY

(Mockingly)

Oh right, right. Now he can just pull himself up by his bootstraps. His life is going to be perfect now.

(Forcefully)

Wake up! You think he has the same chance at getting that job as one of your business school cronies? He doesn't even have the same chance as anyone who took a shower.

MUSICIAN

And what have you done that's so great?

REVOLUTIONARY

I gave him a voice. I gave him the tools to fight back against his oppressors.

(He hands JESSIE a copy of the Communist Manifesto.)

I gave him freedom.

JESSIE

What's my name?

REVOLUTIONARY

What?

JESSIE

My name, son. What is it?

(REVOLUTIONARY doesn't answer.)

JESSIE

You gave me a voice, didn't you? And you don't know my name? How bout you, huh? Suit and tie? Tellin' me I have a shot in hell at gettin'

hired at your company. What's my name?

CAPITALIST

I don't know.

JESSIE

(To the crowd)

Anybody? Anybody here know my fucking name?

GUY

(Quietly)

Jessie. Your name is Jessie.

(JESSIE acknowledges GUY's comment, perhaps with a nod or a small smile.)

JESSIE

(To the REVOLUTIONARY and the CAPITALIST)

You think you're making my life better? Coming in here, handing me shit I don't need.

CAPITALIST

Everybody needs a job.

JESSIE

Yeah? Well, thanks for this paper, but it ain't gettin' me one.

CAPITALIST

Everyone has a chance to make it in life.

JESSIE

You think I screwed up, don't you? That somewhere along the line I was lazy, or bad, or whatever. And that's why I sit here with my sign and my cup and hope I can get enough to eat for the day.

MUSICIAN

Jessie, man, anyone who knows you knows that's not true.

JESSIE

But that's the point. They don't know me.

MUSICIAN

Well? Tell them. And you all pay attention. You might learn something.

JESSIE

I was a solider. Fought in 'Nam. Saw things you can't imagine, and when we got back they gave us a pat on the back and that joke of an army pension. Told us we were supposed to lead normal lives. Forget. Ha. Yeah, right. Forget. Get jobs they told us. It'll help. You can't get a job when all you see is gunfire and death. You can't get a job when you're afraid you're going to die every time you make eye contact with

someone. And an army pension doesn't pay rent.

CAPITALIST

I didn't know. I—

JESSIE

Yeah well, maybe if you spent more time outside of your limo, you'd be a little less of an asshole.

MUSICIAN

(Aside to GUY, jokingly)

Hey, but ignorance is bliss, right?

ASSISTANT

Boss? The cab is here.

(He gestures offstage.)

CAPITALIST

Well, then.

(He leaves.)

JESSIE

At least you get to escape it, huh? The grime? When's my cab coming, huh? Huh?

REVOLUTIONARY

Good work. You showed him. You're a real believer, my friend.

JESSIE

Friend? You don't know a thing about me.

REVOLUTIONARY

That's not fair. I fight for your freedom. All your freedom.

JESSIE

Yeah? Well, why don't you try learning our names first.

(He laughs, a dark, bitter laugh.)

You know, you are sad. You can quote this damn book out of your ass—hell, you probably know every philosopher from here to doomsday, but I bet you can't name one person you've "given a voice" to.

(The REVOLUTIONARY doesn't answer.)

JESSIE

That's what I thought. Get outta here.

REVOLUTIONARY

I was just trying to be—

JESSIE

Go!

(The REVOLUTIONARY storms off.)

JESSIE

(Calling after the REVOLUTIONARY)

You forgot your book. I can't eat this.

(He throws it off.)

MUSICIAN

The road to hell is paved with good intentions, huh Mr. Big Shot.

GUY

Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Is it like this all the time?

MUSICIAN

It's like I told you, Mr. Big Shot. You spend too much time in your cubicle. Come by here, hoping to get your coffee and leave. Think you've gotta do everything quick and efficient-like. Don't even have time to experience what this place *is*. You're an outsider in your own community.

BARISTA

Here, your coffee's done, kid.

GUY

Thanks.

(He takes the coffees, separated into drink containers. But he doesn't leave.)

MUSICIAN

You better get to your meeting, Mr. Big Shot. You got those representatives to impress.

GUY

Yeah, I guess.

(He starts to leave.)

BARISTA

Wait! You gotta tell me, how's the coffee? Yours is the one on the far left.

(GUY takes a sip.)

GUY

It's good. It's really good.

BARISTA

So you'll come back?

GUY

(He considers.)

Yes. I think I will.

(He pauses, thinking.)

Jessie? Do you want to get lunch with me?

JESSIE

What?

GUY

You could come to my meeting, and then afterwards we could get lunch. I'll buy of course.

JESSIE

(Moved)

Yeah, yeah I'd like that.

GUY

Come on.

(He stops. To the BARISTA)

My coffee could have been done a lot faster than that. You kept me here on purpose, didn't you? To see all of this?

(The BARISTA answers with a laugh and a wink. GUY and JESSIE exit, leaving JESSIE's container of money behind.)

BARISTA

You better have a guitar waiting for him next time, bud.

MUSICIAN

You got that right. I knew some time out here would do him good.

BARISTA

(He checks his watch.)

It's your shift now, Sinatra.

MUSICIAN

Yep.

(The MUSICIAN takes his container of money and dumps it into JESSIE's container. MUSICIAN enters the coffee stand and takes the BARISTA's apron from him, putting it on. BARISTA leaves the stand and goes to sit where the MUSICIAN was sitting. He begins to play. Some PERSONs throw money into the MUSICIAN's now empty money container. PERSON 1 comes up to the stand.)

PERSON 1

Small coffee? Black.

MUSICIAN

Two dollars even.

End scene.



Southwestern College
Orange City, Iowa